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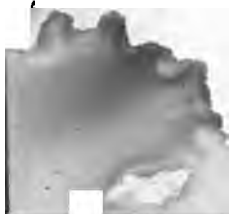
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Percy  
Vincent  
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To. Ancilla Barrett

From Lily Compton  
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A HEROINE OF REALITY

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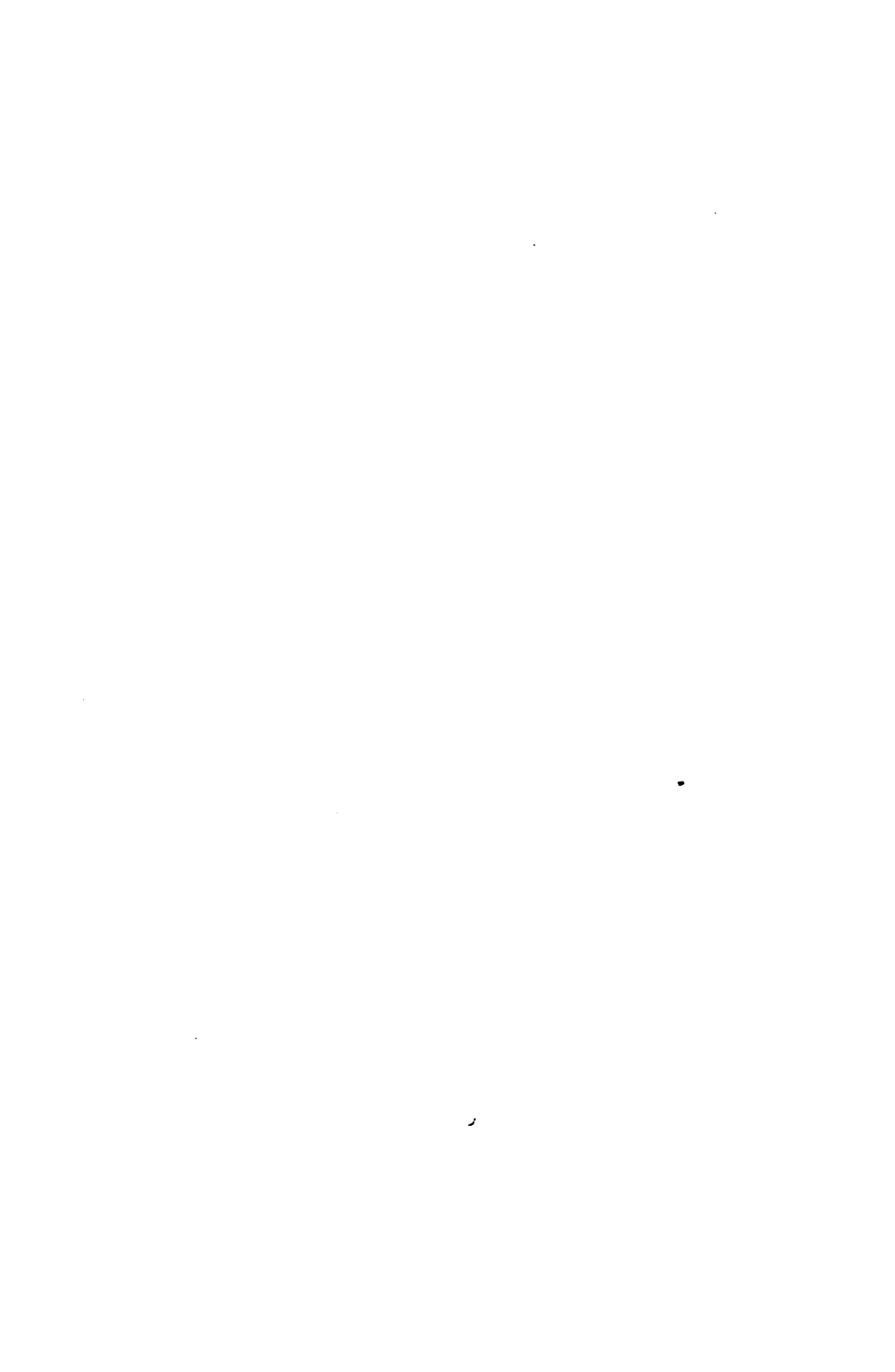
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## PART I



# A HEROINE OF REALITY

## CHAPTER I

### GUESTS AT THE HOTEL HELSENHORN

ON a fine day in the early part of September an Englishman was slowly making his way up the rocky ravine of the Marl by the path that leads from Esend to Marlenberg, in the Canton Valais, Switzerland.

Mortimer Staines had recently retired on a pension from the Indian Civil Service. He was thirty-nine years old, and he was a bachelor. After a life of hard work in India he found it delightful to wander at ease about the continent of Europe, making acquaintance with men and cities that were new to him.

All the summer he had passed in visiting the great capitals—Paris and Rome, Vienna

and the rest. Growing tired at last of cities he determined to go to Switzerland. He was fond of snow mountains—a large part of his time in India had been spent at a hill station—and going through the St Gothard on one of his railway journeys he had seen enough to decide him to spend a couple of months among the Alps.

The whole of August Staines amused himself at Zermatt, Chamonix and other popular tourist centres, with the result that, though he was charmed with Switzerland, he became weary of holiday-making Anglo-Saxons and Teutons, and anxious to get off the beaten track. The proprietor of an hotel at Brig had told him of a place higher up the Rhone Valley, Marlenberg, where there were no mountain railways, few visitors, and only one hotel. Staines immediately determined to go there.

Marlenberg lies to the south of the Rhone, in the valley of the Marl, which joins the main valley of the Rhone at Esend. The mountains there are not of great height, the majority of them only just above the snow

level, while the highest vary from ten to eleven thousand feet. But to anyone who will climb them they afford interesting scrambles and glorious views. To the north, across the Rhone Valley, towers the gigantic range of the Bernese Alps, grim with black, weather-worn precipices, dazzling with gleaming glaciers and peaks which flash sun-messages to each other. Eastward are labyrinths of lesser heights stretching away in the direction of Andermatt. South are the mountains of Ticino and Piedmont. Far away to the westward, beyond the Simplon, rise the giants of the Monte Rosa and the huge masses of the Zermatt group. There is no railway anywhere near Marlenberg. The Jura Simplon system extends no farther than Brig, twelve miles below Esend in the Rhone Valley.

Staines had taken the diligence from Brig to Esend, where he had arranged that his luggage should be sent after him, and now he himself was walking up the steep path which leads through the Marlenthal to the village of Marlenberg.



As he walked in the cool bracing air it had its tonic effect and way with his brain. Life for the moment became as roseate as Zermatt when the sun rises. He complacently revolved his comfortable position in the world. An orphan, with neither brother nor sister, no ties bound him to England. He was free to live his own life, the cosmopolitan one he had chosen. As free as the great black eagle that formed a ring silhouette above him as it winged its strong way up the valley.

Mortimer Staines was an intellectual man, of a slightly cynical turn of mind. Although he had worked hard during his term of service in India, he had yet found time for extensive reading. He had a wide knowledge of English and French literature. He was one of those subtle thinkers who are able to see both sides of most arguments—tolerant logicians. Broad-minded and impartial, and with a distinct quality of personal magnetism, he was well equipped for the part chance gave him to play in life. He was, and he knew it, *homme du monde*.

He was unmarried, not because of any

misfortune he had ever suffered at the hand of a woman, but simply because he had never met one for whom he particularly cared. Yet he was not a misogynist, it was merely the fault of circumstance, and now that he was verging upon forty he imagined that he would remain a bachelor to the end. Besides, a wandering, unfettered life so admirably fitted his temperament that he was not anxious to form a tie that might narrow the horizon of his existence.

The weather at the end of August had been broken and stormy, as is frequently the case in the Alps. But with September there had come a change, and the days passed in cloudless magnificence. Staines perspired as he toiled up the Marlenthal. It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, and the heat of the sun poured down upon the path which was but scantily sheltered here and there by pine trees. The stillness was unbroken save by the tinkling of an occasional sheep bell and the brawling of the Marl as it rushed down its rocky boulder-strewn course to join the Rhone.

Despite his thirty-nine years, Staines showed scarcely any of those signs which betoken the approach of middle age. His hair was thinner, perhaps, than it had been, and here and there the dark brown was shot with grey, but there was none of that embryonic stoutness about him which not infrequently develops when a man is at the end of his fourth decade. He was a broad-shouldered well-proportioned man of middle height. Travel and the variations of climate had bronzed his face, which was somewhat heavy and immobile in feature. His moustache was thick and covered a deep scar immediately beneath the nose, which was straight and prominent. Where the brows met the nose was a furrow of decision, though there might have been observed a lack of strength in the chin below. His eyes were blue and retained the clearness of youth.

As he gradually ascended the Marlenthal he began to wonder when he should see the hotel. At last the valley made a clean curve round to the left and broadened out into un-

dulating pasture land flanked by steep pine forests, above which rose open grass slopes surmounted by peaks of varying height. At the further end a glittering snow dome shut in the view. Where the Marlenthal curved round, on the outer or southern side, two smaller valleys branched off, commanded by snow-clad mountains about eleven thousand feet high.

The village of Marlenberg lay in the pastures of the main valley. On a small eminence above it, to the left as one looked up towards the further end, was the Hotel Helsenhorn, a stone building with a wooden verandah running along the length of the façade.

The hotel did not display many signs of life on this sultry afternoon. There was none of that active, bustling atmosphere, that sense of *va et vient*, which always characterises an hotel at the modernised, Americanised, and generally spoilt centres of tourist resort.

On the verandah a small, bare-legged French boy in a semi-sailor suit was playing

with a pig-tailed, shrill-voiced little French girl. A lumbering youth of about seventeen, apparently their elder brother, was sitting by a small table reading a *brochure*, with a glass beside him of that syrupy, sickly-sweet decoction known on the Continent as "Limonade."

Save for these signs of animation the whole place appeared to be asleep; the stillness was only to be emphasised by the chirping of innumerable grasshoppers in the meadows and the plashing of the Marl over the rocks a little way from the hotel.

The front entrance opened out on to the verandah, which was about six feet above the level of the ground, and was ascended by a flight of wooden steps.

The French children stopped playing for the moment to stare at Staines as he mounted the steps and went in at the door. There was no hotel office, and after pausing a moment he made his way down a passage to a door, from the other side of which he thought he heard voices. He opened it and found himself in the dining-room.

Elias Waldener, the proprietor of the Hotel Helsenhorn, was sitting at a table talking to a friend. He was a typical Swiss, a short, deep-chested man, with a round pleasant face of a slightly Italian cast. He rose as Staines entered, and, taking in his nationality at a glance, said in English, "Goot-day, sir."

"Good-day," said Mortimer Staines. "Can you let me have a room? My luggage is being sent up from Esend."

"Yes, sir. I vill show your room now. Vill you haf ze first floor or ze second?"

"Oh, the second will suit me. Have you many visitors here this month?"

"Oh, no, ve haf ver' few. Eet is late in ze season now; zere is only von French family, von Engleesh family, and two or dree oder peoples. Last mont' ve haf ze house full, but ze veesitors, zey mostly go away at ze end of August."

"You have a good many people here in the summer season then?"

"Oh, yes. Ze last two or dree year zey come more and more. But eet is

quiet place. You vill stop here long, sir?"

"Until the end of the month, I expect."

"Zat is goot. Ach, here is your room, sir. You vill dine at *table-d'hôte* zis evening?"

"Yes, what time is dinner?"

"At half-past seven. Vill you take any-things now?"

"No, thanks, I think I'll wait till dinner."

Elias Waldener retired, and Staines, after a few minutes, seeing that there were yet two hours before dinner, went out for a short walk of exploration.

Marlenberg is not a large place. There are only two stone buildings—the hotel and the church, a small edifice with a miniature steeple. The rest of the village is composed of wooden *châlets* of the usual Swiss type. There are two or three shops and a post-office.

Staines went down a path which turned off from the one by which he had come. It led him through the village across the river by a stone bridge and up in the direction of the church, and then through pine woods

on to higher grass slopes overlooking the valley.

The path was marked at intervals by rough wooden crosses, which bore each an inscription and a date. They were memorials of people killed by the avalanches that fall in the springtime when the snow is beginning to melt higher up. Now in the heat of the late summer, when the snow had receded from all the lower peaks and the rays of the sun shimmered in mirage over the grass, it seemed almost impossible that there could be a time when these green pastures and pine forests were torn and wounded by the terrible career of the great ice-blocks, as hard as steel and cruel with all the blind cruelty of Nature.

Staines went slowly along the path, stopping every now and then to look at the view of the Marlenthal and the surrounding mountains, which became plainer and more vivid as the path, leaving the pine forest, zig-zagged up the exposed slopes of grass.

After a while the way ceased to ascend,



and continued parallel to the valley along the mountain side. He was just lighting a meditative pipe, when he saw, about one hundred yards ahead of him, a girl seated on a stone, sketching. She looked up as he drew near, and he was struck with the beauty of her face.

As a rule faces that other people raved about left him unmoved. It might be that he was hard to please, but it was not often that he saw a girl whom he considered beautiful. Prettiness—the week-day of beauty—he abhorred. For him it had no quality but that of insipidity.

But this girl was undoubtedly beautiful. So he thought as he passed her. Her hair was the colour of a horse chestnut ripe from the pod; her eyes were violet, of that peculiar richness and depth of colour one may sometimes see in a forest pool. The outline of all her features was perfect—beautifully drawn an artist would have called it. Nevertheless the general expression was entirely without the coldness and rigidity which so often goes with “chiselled”

lines. Perhaps the delicate warmth of her complexion redeemed it.

She glanced curiously at Staines as he passed, wondering probably if he were a new visitor at the hotel. He on his side wondered if she were a member of the English family mentioned by the landlord. However, he would soon know. There was nothing like an hotel for picking up acquaintances, especially where the visitors are few, and he would probably be on speaking terms with her before long. He wondered if she were really stopping there. He hoped so.

The girl interested Staines because of the rarity of the type, that was how he put it to himself. The majority of the representatives of feminine England whom he had seen at Swiss hotels were of the large flat-footed kind which provides Continental comic artists with inexhaustible material for caricature at the expense of English people. "Le Clergyman Anglais et ses filles aux pieds plats" riot through French comic literature. It was Mortimer Staines' misfortune that he not only seen the caricature

but also the original. But this girl was quite at war with these conventions.

He continued his walk along the path for another half-hour, and then made his way down into the valley again and back to the hotel.

As he went upstairs to his room, and was passing the landing on the first floor, he heard voices, as of domestic disturbance, issuing from one of the rooms. It seemed as if a mild, middle-aged man was expostulating with an excited female. The closed door, and the voluble rapidity of the voices concealed the details of the discussion, though it by no means disguised the tone of anger, of quarrel which informed it.

Staines smiled to himself as he heard the sounds. Little family jars are generally as amusing to outsiders as they are distressing to the actors. He wondered for a moment whether any traces of the disturbance would be visible at the *table-d'hôte* that evening, and then dismissed the matter from his mind.

When he entered the dining-room, a little after half-past seven, the guests had

already taken their places. On one side of the table sat the French family — papa, mamma, and their offspring, three in number—and two square-shouldered, red-faced Germans. On the other side sat a man of a compact, wiry frame, and refined, clean-cut features. His skin was brown, it looked tough, and he had short iron-grey hair, bristling moustachios, and alert, sinister eyes. Beside him sat the English family.

This consisted of the girl whom Staines had seen that afternoon and of her father and mother. The father seemed about fifty; he was tall and thin, with a sallow complexion, and clean shaven. He wore gold-rimmed spectacles, which gave an added placidity to the mild, kindly expression of his face. His wife was tall also, and in features distinctly resembled her daughter. But she was altogether of coarser fibre, and her complexion was faded — almost unhealthily faded. Her eyes, which were light grey, were slightly bloodshot. Her figure was neither stout nor slim, and still

bore traces of an earlier perfection. As he looked at her, Staines remembered a saying of Daudet's that "at fifty a mother is only a pencil sketch for her daughter."

He found a place laid for him next to this lady. The visitors regarded him with the inquiring stare of criticism generally directed to new arrivals at a small hotel where after a short time everybody knows everybody else.

There was not much conversation during dinner. What there was was carried on in four divisions simultaneously. The two Germans, who were fellow-travellers, talked to each other. The French family talked among themselves. The father of the English family talked to the man with the moustachios. The mother occasionally addressed a remark to her daughter. Staines did nothing but observe.

He noticed that there were slight evidences of strained relations visible between the two elder members of the English family. There was that indescribable electric feeling in their atmosphere that either betokens an

approaching storm or hints at a recent one. The daughter seemed affected by it and occasionally darted a little distressed glance at her mother. Staines wondered vaguely what was the matter, until he remembered the sounds he had heard before the *table-d'hôte*.

After dinner he strolled into the smoking-room. Only three people were there. The two Germans sat talking volubly about some excursion they were meditating.

In an easy-chair, smoking a cigar, was the man who had been next to the English family at dinner. Staines took out a cigar and looked round for a match. There was on the table an open box of the sputtering sulphur kind, with their purple brown flame and poisonous smoke so widely used on the Continent. He glanced askance at them and felt in his pockets for his own box.

"Permit me, monsieur, to offer you a match," said the man in the easy-chair, in English. "I always carry with me some of your English matches. These sulphur things spoil a good cigar."

“Oh, thank you very much,” replied Staines. He lit his cigar with the proffered match and fell into talk with the stranger.

“Are you making a long stay here?” he said.

“But yes, about a month. I came here, it is three days ago, for my (how do you say?) holiday. But let me introduce myself: Colmar de Zouchy, of the French infantry, very much at your service.” And he bowed civilly, half-rising in the chair.

“And I,” said the other in return, “am English. Mortimer Staines, late of the Civil Service in India.”

Thus introduced, the two began talking. They were both men of the world, and each found pleasure in the other's conversation. The Frenchman spoke English excellently, and with only a slight accent or incorrectness here and there, better than Mortimer Staines, whose knowledge of that language was far more literary than colloquial, spoke French.

Colmar de Zouchy had served in the Foreign Legion of France, that extraordinary body of men which, officered almost

exclusively by Frenchmen, includes in the rank and file a collection of all the "ne'er-do-weels" of Europe. He was now retired with the rank of colonel. He had many interesting tales of his experiences in "Biribi," and was altogether entertaining and vivacious.

After a while Staines asked if he knew anything about the English family who were stopping at the Helsenhorn.

"Oh, yes. The father is Professor Keston, the greatest authority in the world on ancient Carthage. I meet him when I serve in Africa. We are old friends. He has stayed with me in Paris, and I have visited him at his home in England. I found him in Paris this year, at the Exposition, and now we are making a tour in Switzerland. We have been to Lucerne, Interlaken, Grindelwald and Meiringen, and then we come over the Grimsel to this place, where we stop for the month; then I will go to Paris and he will go back to England. Is his daughter not charming?"

"Very," answered Staines, calmly, with the



careful and commendable reticence of the man of the world.

“I know her since she was quite small; she was a pretty child, now she is a beautiful woman.”

“Her mother seems to be suffering from some nerve trouble.”

“Yes, she has been like that for a long time; but it is late and I have been walking much to-day, so—you will excuse me—I will go to bed. To-morrow, if you wish it, I will introduce you to my friend the professor.”

“Thank you,” said Staines, rising as he saw the Frenchman about to go. “I should like it very much. Good-night.”

After he had gone, Staines sat for some time smoking and thinking lazily about the Kestons. The professor was a famous man. Miss Keston was charming or appeared so. There was something curious in Mrs Keston which he could not quite define. In fact, here was an English family whose acquaintance seemed to be worth making, perhaps worth cultivating. He was conscious of a mild though pleasurable anticipation as he fell asleep that night.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ASCENT OF THE ENGENHORN

DAY rushed up over the Marlenthal with a red splendour like the sound of trumpets. The golden peaks hung above the shadowy pencilled valley, where faint grey-purple mists still glided in ghostly sarabands among the pine trees. The grass was like smooth emeralds on which someone had been scattering seed pearls. It was like a king's robe four hundred years ago. The air of the morning was as fresh as new milk.

Staines went down to the dining-room in the best of spirits.

The two German visitors had already made their meal, and were gone out for the day. The French contingent and the others were not down yet, so Staines had the room to himself for the time being.

He had nearly finished his light meal of rolls and coffee, when the door opened and Miss Keston entered.

He could not help seeing that she did not seem happy. He wondered if she had been crying. Her eyes were red, and there was a nervous trembling about her mouth, which showed something was wrong.

Staines again fell to wondering what was the matter with this family. It was not quite usual that people on a holiday should be in distress like this. Was it merely some little domestic jar about an ephemeral trifle? Or was it something more serious? Bad news from home, very likely. Yesterday there had been signs of disturbance, and now again there seemed to be thunder in the air. That was if he had any right to judge from this girl's appearance. However, he might soon be able to form some conclusion. His new acquaintance, the French officer, had promised to introduce him.

Still curious, and yet annoyed with him-

self for it, he went out on to the verandah and sat down to enjoy his pipe.

He found it difficult to understand why he was thus interested in affairs that were no concern of his. But he was an observant man, the Helsenhorn hotel was small, and there were no other matters to occupy his mind. Nothing breeds interest like propinquity. That is why hermits have always chosen refuges where the horizon is large. To be detached one must feel oneself a small item in a great space. Possibly, also, Miss Keston had something to do with it. If her temperament went hand in hand with her appearance, she was indeed a girl worth knowing: even to a middle-aged man of the world, "*cujus octavum trepidavit ætas claudere lustrum*"—and Staines blew large puffs of smoke into the air.

In spite of his tendency to cynicism, he felt a kindly interest in one of the most beautiful girls he had ever seen. He was not a misogynist, and had no reason to be one.

Also the magnificence of the weather might have heightened his sympathy. Distress of any kind on such a day was absolutely out of tune with Nature. There ought not to be discord on such a beautiful morning.

Moreover, the professor was one of the famous savants of the day. He ought to be interesting, unless he were too hopelessly absent-minded, and the absent-minded professor after all existed more generally in fiction than in real life.

Lastly, there was Mrs Keston, with that indefinable atmosphere about her of something—not precisely wrong—but at least peculiar, which seemed to forecast developments.

Suddenly the door of the hotel opened and Professor and Mrs Keston, with Colmar de Zouchy, came out on to the verandah.

‘Ah! good morning, Mr Staines,’ said the colonel. ‘Let me introduce you to my friends the Professor and Mrs Keston!’ They exchanged the courteous and conventional commonplaces proper to the occasion.

The professor had a soft even voice and seemed to weigh and consider each sentence as he delivered it. He did not give Staines the slightest idea that he was either absent-minded or abstracted.

Mrs Keston spoke in shrill strings of words which were usually quite inconsequential. But Staines remembered that at dinner the previous evening her talking had been quite different. True, she had not spoken much, but what little she had said had been subdued and coherent. Now she was shrill and incoherent. And then again he remembered the sounds he had heard before dinner. It was certainly rather curious.

“I am thinking,” the professor said, “I am thinking of making a short excursion with my wife and daughter this afternoon up the Engenhorn. It is not high; but it gives a very fine view, very fine. It is that grassy peak, you can just see it above the pine forest behind the hotel. I should be delighted if Mr Staines—will accompany us. And you—colonel?”

“Desolated, my dear professor, that I cannot come. But to-day I shall go across the valley of the Rhone to the Hotel Jungfrau, on the Eggishorn, where I have made the arrangements for a guide to meet me and to climb the Grand Aletschhorn. I shall not be here again till to-morrow evening at a late hour.”

“Well, I hope you will have a good time. But you will come with us, Mr Staines?”

“I shall be delighted. I suppose we start soon after *déjeuner*.”

“Yes. Let me see. *Déjeuner* is at one. Then suppose we say two o'clock for the start?”

“That will suit me admirably.”

And here Mrs Keston broke in,—

“Yes. Won't it be delightful? Quite delightful. I am sure we shall all enjoy it so much, and the weather is so good, and the snow mountains do look so nice with the sun shining on them, and we shall get such an appetite for dinner. I am sure I shall enjoy myself so much.”

Staines noticed that the professor seemed ill at ease whenever his attention was directed to his wife. "No wonder," thought Staines. "I hope the daughter doesn't take after her mother."

After a while, the colonel excused himself and set out down the path by which Staines had arrived on the day before. The Professor and Mrs Keston went indoors, and Staines found an edition of *Tartarin sur les Alpes* among the books which, left behind by visitors from time to time, constituted the library of the hotel. He went out into the adjacent pine wood to read and smoke. Finding a comfortable place, where there was a patch of grass at the foot of a pine, he sat down to enjoy himself for the rest of the morning.

After about two hours his attention was distracted from the adventures of the immortal Tarasconian by voices near him.

Again he heard sounds of quarrelling, though this time it was evident that the professor was not on the scene. One



voice belonged to Mrs Keston, the other to her daughter.

The wood was on the slope of the mountain side, and Staines was sitting with his back against a pine, not far from where the open pastures above bordered on the trees.

A short distance below him was a primitive path, running transversely through the wood, and leading from the village to the upper meadows, where it vanished in that curiously abrupt fashion characteristic of paths in the more uncivilised parts of Switzerland.

Mrs Keston and her daughter were walking along this path. As they came nearer, and more directly below him, Staines could distinctly hear what they were saying. He did not want to play the eavesdropper, but it was impossible for him to move without being heard and seen by them, which would be awkward and uncomfortable, for Mrs Keston seemed to be very excited. She was pouring out words, though not quite so incoherently as she had done a short time ago.

"Denise," she was saying, "I really cannot see what objection you have to Colonel de Zouchy, who is in every way desirable. He is rich and well born, and a most suitable husband altogether. Why won't you marry him? Why! why! why!" and her voice ended in a shriek.

"I tell you, mother, I will not marry him. Why should you make me miserable like this? You cannot know how you make me suffer. Colonel de Zouchy's money would not make me love him, and he and I would only be unhappy together. Why do you keep on worrying me?"

"But he loves you, child, he—"

"Hush, mother, do be careful, there is someone sitting quite near us, we shall be overheard." She spoke in a low tone, but Staines could still hear distinctly what she said. Mrs Keston took not the slightest notice.

"He loves you. He told me so himself, and I should really think he has told you the same thing often enough. I know he's told you himself. You know you would come

to love him yourself after a time. Why don't you accept him?"

"It's useless to go on talking, mother, so that's all about it." And then the voices became indistinct as they became more distant.

Miss Keston's name, then, was Denise. "A pretty name too," thought Staines. "So it's the old story after all. The vulgar-minded parent, the prospective husband desirable to everyone save the girl herself, and so on. Simply a play after Molière. But no. Not quite. This mother is peculiar, and probably the little drama, even if the plot is stale, will be amusing to watch."

He went on with his book. Mrs Keston and her daughter did not return along the path. Probably they made a circuit back to the hotel. Towards one o'clock Staines arose and strolled in for *déjeuner*.

Just outside the dining-room he met the professor and his daughter.

"Let me introduce you, Mr Staines, to my daughter. Denise, this is Mr Staines,

who is going with us this afternoon up the Engenhorn."

They bowed to each other, and went in and took their places. After a minute or so, Mrs Keston came down.

"I don't think I'll come with you this afternoon after all," she said. "I'm feeling just a wee bit headachy. It must be the sun. It is *so* hot. I think I'll just go upstairs and lie down in my room, and have some tea later on."

Staines noticed that there was a third gradation in her speech since the morning, when he had been introduced. Then she had been excited and had spoken without pause. Afterwards, when he had heard her in the wood, she had been slightly less rapid and more coherent. Now she was almost normal. These changes were quite noticeable and were curious.

Nothing worth recording happened at *déjeuner*. There were only the French people besides themselves, the two Germans being away for the day. The

colonel, of course, had gone off to climb the Aletschhorn.

Staines sat next to Denise, with whom he talked on commonplace subjects. Certainly she was very fascinating. Her manner to him was without shyness or embarrassment, and it was perfectly well-bred. He began to look forward to the excursion of the afternoon.

After the meal he went to the smoking-room for the few minutes that intervened before the start.

Professor Keston with Denise came down prepared for the expedition. The professor looked workmanlike. He was dressed, as Staines also was, in a broad-brimmed hat of the Tyrolese type, a flannel shirt, a rough tweed suit, stockings and thick, nailed boots. His daughter looked attractively cool. A well-dressed woman must, among other things, be *bien chaussée*. Denise, this afternoon, wore brown boots, which were of a somewhat more serviceable kind than those which ladies usually wear. Still they were small, neat, and entirely charming.

They set out laughing and talking together. There were no difficulties on the Marienthal side of the Engenhorn. The simplest way to ascend was to make straight for the summit, first through the trees, and then up the open boulder-strewn slopes. It was steep walking, but they were amply compensated by the increasing glory of the view and the growing invigoration of the air as they proceeded.

The professor went in front, leader of the expedition. Now and then he turned round to point out some striking feature of the landscape to the others. Staines and Denise dropped quickly and naturally into a quiet comradeship, which had no flavour of its so recent growth, though their conversation was necessarily somewhat fitful by reason of the steepness of the mountain side.

At last they reached the summit. The view was doubled. The Bernese Oberland to the north came into sight. Mortimer Staines had never seen anything but passing glimpses of this great range on the

southern side, which is so different from the northern. Though there are giant glaciers there — the mighty rifted rock-bound Aletsch, Fiescher, and, further to the north-east, that which is the source of the Rhone—yet there is not such a glory of whiteness as is to be seen from Grindelwald and the Wengernalp. The Jungfrau has here none of the exquisite, curving grace and tender suppleness of a maiden. Here she is grim and rigid; frowning and terrible. Nor is she any longer the queen, predominant, stupendous, dwarfing her neighbours. She is only one among the rest of the swarthy-sided, snow-crowned, precipitous heights.

“The view from the Engenhorn,” the professor remarked, “is more limited than that from some of the mountains in its neighbourhood, but I think you will find it hard to beat on the whole.”

“Papa, what is that great mountain over there, some way to the left of the Jungfrau?”

“That, my dear, is the Aletschhorn, which

the colonel has gone to climb. It is, I believe, a very difficult peak, but the colonel is a first-rate mountaineer."

"And that sharp peak, almost due north, like a dog's tooth, to the right of the Jungfrau?"

"That is the Finsteraarhorn. The highest. Just over fourteen thousand feet."

So they continued talking and admiring, localising various heights, intoxicated with the magnificence of the panorama before them.

Suddenly the professor said, "Waldener told me this morning that there was edelweiss on some of these mountains here, notably near that small eminence of rock just over there. I think I will go and look. Don't you trouble to come. I will bring enough for all of us. That is, if I can find any."

And he went a little way down the eastern side of the peak into a small cross valley, or rather gully, which separated the Engenhorn from the Föhnhorn.



Staines and Denise sat down on the grass. It was about five o'clock, and a light wind had arisen which was delightfully cooling and refreshing. They were silent for a moment. Then she began to sing softly to herself:—

“Le vent qui vient à travers la montagne  
Me rendra fou.”

“What a lovely thing that is,” said Staines.

“Yes, it is my favourite. I love all French lyrics.”

“I'm very fond of them too. They always have such a charming simplicity about them. It is so with all French literature, I think—serious, tragic, comic, anything you like. Take *Tartarin de Tarascon* for instance. No one but a Frenchman could have created a character like that. So simple and so immortally ridiculous.”

“I've never read *Tartarin de Tarascon*,” she replied, “but I read *Tartarin sur les*

*Alpes* the other day. I shrieked with laughter over it—it was so funny. I picked the book up in the hotel.”

“So did I to-day. I sat reading it the whole morning.” As he said this it flashed into her mind that the man whom she had seen in the wood had been reading a book. It had not occurred to her on being introduced that Staines was the man who had overheard her mother and herself. It might have been one of the Germans, or the French *père de famille* who did not understand English. Now an instinct told her that it had been Mortimer Staines, and assuredly he could not have avoided hearing almost every word. She would find out for certain if it *had* been he. A point blank remark to the effect that she had seen him would be best, since if she were mistaken he would be none the wiser, and if not, why then, then she was lonely and miserable, and a half thought came to her mind that this kindly middle-aged man might be a good confidant. An impulse moved her to half confidences.

“Why,” she said, “of course I saw you.

You were sitting against a tree in that wood down there."

Staines was unprepared for this. He hesitated. Why had she asked the question? He answered, to gain time, by a counter question.

"Do you mean that wood down there, below the patch of darker green?"

And as he spoke and pointed, in the space of a second, he identified his mind with hers and half realised why she had asked him. He was a man of insight and instincts as well as a man of reason.

"Yes," she answered. "Why, there is only one real wood down there."

"That was the place."

"Then it was you whom I saw sitting against a pine?"

"Yes."

"Did you see me?"

"I thought someone passed along the path below me. So it was you, then."

She spoke on impulse. She would confide in him as much as he knew already. She said, "Yes, mother and I passed along, and

you must have heard what we said. Did you?"

Again he hesitated. Should he deny it or not? Yes, deny it. She was a woman and would see through the negative. Staines had a curious faculty of drawing confidences. It was not the first time new acquaintances had confided in him. So he replied, "No."

She laughed, slightly hysterically, it seemed. "That is not true. You did hear us. I am sure you heard. I don't know why I am speaking to you like this. But you seem different to most people. And I have no one to confide in, and I am so lonely, and—oh, what am I saying?" She stopped short with the tears in her eyes.

Staines said gently, "Trust me, and tell me about it."

After a pause she went on, "Colonel de Zouchy wants to marry me. I believe he really does honestly love me; but he is so much older than I am—and I—I don't even like him much. But he is determined to marry me. Papa is on his side, too. Nothing would please him more than to

see me the wife of his old friend. And mother—oh, I cannot go on—I can't—I can't."

There are times when a sympathetic silence is best. Staines knew this.

Soon she continued, "I know you must think me foolish to behave like this, but if you knew how miserable they have made me between them."

"I can't tell you," said Staines, "how sorry I am for you, and to you mere sympathy must seem so little. But I do feel for you. And I feel the honour you do me in confiding in me. I wish I could do something for you."

"Thank you, oh, thank you," said the girl, between her sobs.

Just then they heard a footstep a little way down in the direction in which the professor had gone to look for the edelweiss.

Denise hurriedly tried to conceal her emotion. She arose, and in doing so let fall her alpenstock, which was a long smooth iron-shod stick without crook or handle. They were near the edge of the flat space which formed the summit, and the alpenstock rolled down the mountain side for a short distance.

Staines mercifully let her go and fetch it herself. He was considerably puzzled by the violence of her emotion. There scarcely seemed to him to be adequate cause for it. Also, there had been one (to him) very curious point about her outburst. But he would think about it later on. He turned to the professor, who had come up in the meanwhile.

“Found any edelweiss, professor?” he said.

“No,” was the answer. “It is perfectly astounding how impossible it is to find that flower oneself. It is more astounding how easy it is to buy it from any beggar or child by the roadside. But I see that it is getting late. We must be going. The *table-d’hôte* is at half-past seven. It is now nearly a quarter to six, and it takes at least an hour and a half to get home.”

There was but little conversation on the way down. Staines answered the professor’s remarks with short, dry sentences. Denise was silent.

When they reached the hotel, the bell was just ringing for dinner, and as they entered,

Mrs Keston came out of the salon. Suddenly one of the French children (it was the small boy), who was running along the passage, collided with her. She blazed out into a sort of frenzy, and struck the child on the head. The blow was quite unjustified, and the boy's father, who came downstairs at that moment, saw the incident, and remonstrated somewhat heatedly in French with Mrs Keston. She replied shrilly in the same language to the effect that the child ought to be thoroughly ashamed of himself, and that she wondered at his father's interference. The man became really angry, and a serious quarrel was beginning, when the professor, telling his daughter to go into the dining-room, walked up to his wife, took her by the arm, and led her upstairs, vainly trying to calm her on the way. The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders and went in to dinner, relieved at the angry lady's disappearance.

Meanwhile Staines had gone upstairs, having seen the first part of the occurrence. After a few minutes he went down to the

dining-room. In a short time the professor appeared. It may well be imagined that dinner was a gloomy affair. The French people on the opposite side of the table to the English discussed the incident in low tones, which made the situation the more embarrassing.

After dinner the professor, his daughter and Staines went and sat out on the verandah. They were undisturbed by the French family, who were in the salon. The professor carefully avoided any subject of conversation that might lead, directly or indirectly, to his wife. His daughter talked but little. After a short time she said she felt tired and would go to bed. Soon after her departure the professor followed.

Staines sat smoking and meditating to the accompaniment of the brawling river. The moon was at the full, and the valley looked very beautiful with the soft contrasts of deep blue velvet shadows below and the glistening lemon-coloured moonlit snow above. Where the peaks had no snow, the black forms stood out against the sky with all their roughness of outline softened and toned down.



The feature of the conversation on the top of the Engenhorn that afternoon which had puzzled Staines had been not only the violence of Denise's outburst, but also the fact that she had broken down completely on the subject of her mother. She had sobbed out, "I can't go on—I can't—I can't," and then, after a pause, had finished off without telling him any more. Of course there had not been time for her to tell him much more, but he doubted very much whether she would have continued even if the professor had stayed away longer. Not to continue after saying that she could not was consistent, but hardly womanlike. What, then, was it that made the daughter so miserable, as obviously she was? A girl ought not to be in such extreme trouble simply because her parents wished her to marry and she herself did not. Miserable and lonely she might be, but then why did mentioning her mother affect her so? The reason which made her confide in a stranger must have been a compelling one. That also had to be taken into account.

Always the argument centred round the mother. What was the matter with Mrs Keston? Her different gradations of voice, her late frenzy with the French child, what did these mean? Was she merely so wildly eccentric as to be a nuisance to those around her? Then how account for her appearance? Was she mad? No, with all her peculiarity of behaviour, she did not give the impression of being insane. Was she innately hysterical? She was hysterical certainly, but there seemed to be something else behind the hysteria, which was the cause of it. Her voice suggested the unequal intervals of some influence. What was this influence? Did she habitually take some drug? Scarcely that—at least it seemed to Staines that the effects were not altogether drug-like.

Suddenly the thought rushed to his mind. Drink. Almost undoubtedly. He was not absolutely certain, but a little more observation would settle the matter. If it were drink, it must in all probability be secret dram drinking, for he had noticed that she took no wine at *déjeuner* or dinner.

Staines was himself a teetotaler, had been so always, and benefited much by it, especially since he had been an Indian civil servant. He found the constant habit of "pegs" in India, indulged in by civilians and army men alike, was the greatest contributory cause to slackness, if not to something worse. He remained unusual among his comrades, and never had any reason to regret his determination.

Poor Mrs Keston. He hoped he should turn out to be wrong in his deductions. How would it all end? What would happen next at this hotel?

His train of thought was interrupted by the return of the two Germans. They wished him a good evening as they passed inside. He returned the courtesy, and continued his meditations.

How did Mrs Keston manage to obtain what he feared she drank? Could not the professor prevent her? It would seem the easiest thing in the world, and yet it was a commonplace that women were diabolically clever when they wanted their own way.

But after all, perhaps, it was assuming too much to attribute the condition of Mrs Keston to drink. There might be some other cause. Did the French colonel know? He would sound him on the matter.

So the colonel was in love with Denise. Was there anyone else in the same plight—a younger and more fortunate man? Perhaps. It was always so in the dramas and comedies, and the dramas and comedies were not always untrue. They only exaggerated truth, that was all. What sort of a young man was he, if young man there were? Was he languishing at home, perchance, somewhere in England, poor and therefore undesirable? Or had she never yet met with her ideal? Scarcely that; she probably had a lover, the colonel's rival. Why was her mother so anxious to make her marry Colmar de Zouchy? That the professor should approve of such a match was comprehensible; but why was Mrs Keston so intent upon it, so excited about it? But that might be because—

So his thoughts went on revolving round

his latest English acquaintances. The air began to grow chilly, and he got up and went into the smoking-room. There he found the two Germans who had just finished their supper. They entered into conversation with him. They were very pleasant fellows, and Staines sat and talked of mountaineering and such-like subjects until they all retired to rest.

As he was going upstairs that night he again heard the shrill voice of Mrs Keston quarrelling with her husband.

And, outside in the valley, the pure mountain water of the Marl tumbled along over the boulders, and, far up on the highest summits, the moonbeams glittered on the eternal snow.

## CHAPTER III

### A SHORT WALK

IN the morning, when Staines went down to breakfast, he found Denise and her father already at the table. Mrs Keston was not there.

It was a magnificent morning. The rays of the sun shone in upon them as they sat at breakfast. Denise was cheerful and vivacious; and the professor seemed to have quite shaken off the distress of the previous evening.

"If Mrs Keston is really in the condition in which I have thought she may be," thought Staines, "her husband seems to take things calmly enough."

He had not gauged the professor yet. The man had an unsympathetic, easy-going, self-centred nature, and the painful scenes with his wife only affected him as it were

locally. They did not cast a gloom over him, and once over were soon forgotten.

As for his daughter, she was young, and youth has great powers of resilience. Also, because her room was on a different floor to that of her parents, she had not heard the sounds which Staines had caught the night before as he went upstairs to bed.

“What do you propose doing to-day, professor?” Staines asked. “Have you any particular excursion in your mind?”

“Well, I think the three of us might take a walk before *déjeuner* up the Sollenthal. In the afternoon, doubtless, my wife will accompany us on another short expedition to some near place. Or she may come with us this morning. I shall be charmed if you will come too. But do not let me interfere with you—that is to say, if you have any plans of your own?”

“In the afternoon I have arranged to make a small ascent with the two Germans who are staying here, but this morning, if I may, nothing would please me better than to come with you.”

"I always think a small hotel is so much nicer than a big one," remarked Denise. "Where you have a large number of people they keep to themselves so, but here we are all quite old friends in no time."

"That is the advantage of coming here in September," Staines answered; "not only is the weather usually finer than in August, but there are fewer visitors. Waldener told me the other day that in August he had the house full."

"Waldener is a very nice fellow," said the professor, "and no mean mountaineer. I intend to ask him if he will take us up the Schönhorn to-morrow."

He said it with the complacent air of a simple-minded man who thinks he has made a good suggestion.

"Is the Schönhorn difficult, papa?"

"Not exceedingly difficult. But still dangerous for inexperienced people, unaccompanied. One might lose the way, and I believe there are several nasty falls possible."

"Will the colonel go with us?" she asked.



"In all probability not. I should think he would need a rest after the Aletschhorn, and he is not so active as he used to be."

"Not so active as he used to be," thought Staines; "and he expects her youth and activity to supply his own. I should think he is over fifty, and she" (he looked at her) "is twenty-two, perhaps. Hardly a well-assorted marriage."

Mortimer Staines noticed that he was becoming accustomed to think of Miss Keston as Denise. But then he was much older than she. The name fitted her personality somehow.

Just as they finished their meal the two Germans came in. Staines began talking to them about the proposed expedition of the afternoon, while the professor and his daughter left the room. The Germans wanted to climb as far as possible up the Geilenpfad, a small and little-known pass into Piedmont from the Marenthal. The ascent commenced from Feldenhofen, a village about two and a half miles to the east of Marlenberg. After settling the time of

starting and various other details, Staines left them to their coffee and rolls, and went into the smoking-room to wait for Denise and her father.

As he was sitting there with his pipe, the door opened and Denise came in with her hat on.

"I thought I should find you here," she said. "Mother is just coming down to breakfast, and papa has some letters to write. I want to do a little sketching, so I propose to go on in front of them so as to get more time. Will you wait, or come now?"

"I'll come now," Staines answered. And he went and got his hat and stick from the hall.

As they went down the steps of the verandah together they saw the French children playing on the open space in front of the hotel. There is a peculiar reticence of movement, restraint of pose, in the French child at play. He seems to take his pleasures far more sadly than the proverbial Englishman of the French press. The little boy in the semi-sailor suit and the little girl

with the platted pig-tail were amusing themselves by throwing pebbles to see who could throw farthest, with all the solemn gravity of childhood. Their elder brother stood near, smoking an after-breakfast cigarette. He was evidently but a new devotee of nicotine. Since he was practising the art thus openly, it was probable that he had the consent of his parents. His method of smoking was to hold the cigarette firmly between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, convey it to his mouth, draw one puff, take the cigarette from his lips and blow the smoke out in one somewhat minute cloud. This process he enjoyed with an apprehensive delight.

"I hope we sha'n't be hit by a stray stone from those children," said Denise; "they don't seem particularly careful where they throw them. Luckily we shall be out of range in a minute."

"What is amusing me," replied Staines, "is the sight of that youth smoking. Look at him, mark the solemn admiration with which he eyes his cigarette as he takes it out of his mouth."

"It is certainly funny," she agreed. "I remember the one occasion in my life when I tried a cigarette I did it like that too. I don't think women ought to smoke, do you?"

"Certainly not" (Staines was old-fashioned in some ways); "all the same they have different ideas in different places. Has it ever occurred to you what a particularly feminine thing a cigarette is? I mean that a woman smoking a cigarette is at least tolerable, once you get over the idea of a woman smoking at all. Whereas the idea of a woman with a pipe is absolutely abominable."

"Look at that peasant woman, though," she answered.

As they were going along the path, a brawny, smiling, brown-faced woman passed them, gripping a huge curved pipe between her teeth. Such a sight is often to be seen among the Swiss peasants. In rural Switzerland, as in the Irish slums of London, the women smoke pipes, though whereas the Irish woman inhales the fumes of the black

and fragrant cutty, the daughters of Switzerland prefer a large wooden pipe.

"Yes," said Staines, "the idea doesn't seem so inappropriate in her case, does it? Still I should be sorry to see you like that," and he laughed.

Denise laughed too. "Well, I don't think there is much danger of such a thing. But I am sure you would look more comfortable if you were to follow that good lady's example. Won't you smoke, Mr Staines?"

"Provided that you don't object to the homely and inexpensive pipe."

"Not I, I'm far too much accustomed to it from my father's friends. Most savants smoke, I think."

Staines lit up. "Here is a parable for you," he said. "We are all like lighted pipes. The pipe itself is the body, the tobacco is the mind, and the smoke, without which the other two are as nothing, is the soul. When the fire is extinct we go out."

"That's quite good," she answered. "We shall soon be like those brilliant creations of the modern novelists who talk in strings of

*mal à propos* epigrams ; though I never met anyone in real life who could keep that sort of thing up more than twice running."

"Nor I ; for the only person I ever met who could was not original. And he stopped when I told him that I also had read the author of *Dorian Gray*."

"Who was the brilliant person."

"A young man I met at the Schweizerhof, Lucerne. He was quite brilliant—I should think about twenty-four years of age—a writer of little decadent studies for the smart papers, so he said. Rather an objectionable young man, I thought. That style begins to pall on one after a bit."

"I don't think you ought to judge a man by the little you see of him at an hotel."

"Perhaps not, but I have seen a good many men in my time. And I have been accustomed to size them up at sight, as the Americans say. Still, of course, one makes mistakes. And this particular youth may be a very nice young man really ; possibly my estimate of him was wrong. Still that was my opinion."

"A writer for the smart papers," she said meditatively. "What was his name?"

"Vane - Wenston, I believe. Geoffrey Vane-Wenston."

Denise started almost imperceptibly. She said nothing. Mortimer Staines noticed the start, slight as it was. "Does she know him?" he thought. "How curious if we had here the one actor necessary to complete our little drama."

At this moment they left the main path which led down the Marlenthal to Esend. They descended through some shrubs, made their way across the Marl and up the opposite side.

As they passed a confluence of two streams, one of which flowed from the Sollenthal, Staines watched the radiant creature by his side. Somewhere about him he had a strain of fanciful and sometimes fantastic humour. Denise seemed like some fairy princess spirit of the mountains. In her delicate face shone the soul of the laughing streams and ethereal snows. In her hair breathed the subtle essence of the flower-starred woods

and fields. She seemed to focus and combine in herself the haunting glories of the Alps—and outshine them all.

She knew he was looking at her in admiration, and was not displeased. Mortimer Staines interested her. She wondered what he was, what he had been, whether he was married. She would like to find out something about this man whom she had known less than forty-eight hours, and to whom she had already given some of her confidence. She would try and draw him out. Hitherto he had not talked to her about himself, and there seemed to be no prospect that he would do so.

“Have you been long in Switzerland, Mr Staines?” she asked.

“Since the beginning of August. But I am enjoying this month best. I much prefer this quiet valley and the Hotel Helsenhorn to the swarming hordes of Zermatt and Chamonix. I like crowds also—in cities, but I am apt to grow tired of tourist-resorts and tourists.”

“That is what I think. I wish we had



more time to stay here than just this month. Are you going back to England soon?"

"I don't know. I'm wandering about at present."

"Then you haven't anything particular to do?"

"No. I left the Indian Civil Service at the beginning of this year, and now I am enjoying a sort of *Wanderjahr*, as they say in Germany."

"Don't you find it a delightfully strange contrast to your former life?"

"Yes. I have had a very good time these last few months. All the same I enjoyed life in India very much. I dare say I shall be awfully dull later on with nothing to do. That's one of the disadvantages of early retirement. I've sometimes seen it happen. A man can't die in harness. He may drop into an imbecile old age. Still, at present, I am quite enamoured of a cosmopolitan semi-Bohemian existence, and I don't suppose I shall give it up just yet."

"You are quite different to my ordinary

idea of the retired Indian civil servant who comes home with a bad temper, and swears and throws boots at the servants, and hardly recognises his children, who have been at school in England since they were quite babies."

"Well, I don't know about having a bad temper and throwing things. I believe I am fairly equable, and, anyway, I've neither children nor a wife, so I suppose I am different from your conception."

"You ought to go to England, though, even if only for a short time. After all, it's your native country, and who knows but you might not even marry and settle down?"

"I hardly think it possible; besides, you see, I'm not sure that I want to."

"But now"—she was beginning, when suddenly she broke off. "Oh, I must sit down and sketch here."

She did so, and began to prepare her materials, for the view was a lovely one.

They were some distance up the Sollenthal. On their right rose steep stretches of

grassy mountain side, where cattle were grazing with a musical tinkling of bells. On the other side of the valley, a long low ridge, covered with scrubby Alpine rhododendrons, and adorned by infrequent groups of fir trees, hid from sight the ranges behind, except for the vision of the splintered spearheads and gleaming helmets that silently proclaimed the presence of a mighty array of mountains.

On the right, the green stretches of meadowland, radiant with the flowers of late summer time, sloped up to a snow-mottled mass of brown rock. Shutting in the forward view, towered the lord of the valley, black and huge, with radiating spurs dipped in the sombre forest that filled the hollows. The light smote in coloured contrasts across the tree-tops, and was refracted with dazzling intensity from the crags that frowned here and there in a gap among the pines. On the mountain head shone twin stars of snow that scintillated in the rays of the sun.

Denise took her sketching book and sat

down on one of the boulders which were strewn along the bottom of the valley. Staines made a seat for himself on the grass at her side.

He knew he ought to be admiring the surrounding scenery, but he continually found himself admiring the picture beside him instead. She was sitting in the same position in which he had first seen her on his arrival in Marlenberg. She interested him more now than then. Certainly no more charming way than this of spending a fine morning could have been devised. But always on the horizon lay the shadow of her mother and of De Zouchy, and now the young man Vane-Wenston had added a new element of mystery to the situation.

Denise looked at him for a moment.

"A penny for your thoughts," she said.

"Do you really want to know? Well, then, I was thinking how delightful you look. You were sitting exactly like that the first time I ever saw you."

"That was only two days ago," she answered, "and yesterday—" she blushed

confusedly, remembering suddenly the conversation on the Engenhorn. There was a pause.

"Yesterday," he said gravely, "you did me the honour of confiding in me, as if I were an old friend."

"Yes, it was a new thing for me to have someone sympathising with me."

There was a silence. "I wonder," thought she, "if he would sympathise with me if he knew the whole. He thinks he knows all, and he considers it commonplace enough. Would he consider it more commonplace if he knew all?"

But Staines did not believe that he knew more than half.

As they sat quietly they heard a sound of footsteps coming up the valley towards them. They looked, and Denise's eyes grew terror-stricken and filled with tears. There, about a hundred yards from them on the path, was Mrs Keston without the professor.

She was walking rapidly, jerkily, almost running, tripping up and nearly falling

every now and then over stones, kicking small pebbles. With her right hand she held up her skirt as if under the impression that there was mud on the ground. In her left hand, which quivered and shook, she carried an open parasol which she only just could hold over her head. Her eyes were staring and bloodshot. Her faded face was flushed and damp with perspiration. She was breathing hard and quickly.

She broke into an inarticulate exclamation as she caught sight of Staines and her daughter there. She rushed up to the latter, and, in a moment, before there was time to think, she seized the sketch book and flung it into the stream, shrieking, "I won't have you writing to that young man. Always, always, always writing letters to him. Why don't you write to the colonel—I tell you the colonel, do you hear?"

Denise hid her face in her hands. The shame was overbearing, horrible. And that he should see it too, oh! it was terrible.

Her mother stood there on the path, choked now with blind rage, unable to say

anything more for the moment. As for Staines, he had risen to his feet, and was standing watching her, uncertain what to do. It was a ghastly situation.

Suddenly Mrs Keston turned on him. "And you, sir, may I ask what you are doing here alone with my daughter? You're not the colonel. Who are you? Who are you, I say?"

Her parasol had fallen open on the ground as she threw the sketch book away, and she let it lie unheeded, while she twisted her hands together with frantic, nervous contortions. Staines bent down, picked up the parasol and handed it to the unfortunate lady, who snatched it, without thanking him, and shut it up with a tearing jerk which broke the catch.

There was no need to reply to her question, for she immediately swung round on her daughter again and said,—

"I must insist on your coming back with me at once ; at once, I tell you ; and I forbid you to come out without me any more." Again she choked and became inarticulate.

Denise arose sobbing wearily, and threw a despairing, appealing glance at Staines. Her sobs were inexpressibly painful to listen to, her glance inexpressibly painful to see. Her mother snatched at her arm, and in doing so let drop her parasol. The handle fell against a sharp stone. The knob, which was of a heavy, solid, glazed material, broke off with a crack, and the thread of a hollow steel screw appeared. Some liquid trickled out and formed a little circling pool on the ground. It was brandy. The handle and spine of the parasol were hollow.

So this was one of Mrs Keston's devices for obtaining secret drams. She herself was far too intoxicated to notice the disaster, or even the fact that she had the sunshade no longer in her hand. She began to drag her daughter along the path, talking shrilly the while, almost screaming.

It was a fortunate thing that there were no passers-by to witness this scene. The Sollenthal was entirely uninhabited, and the only buildings in it were occasional cattle huts and wooden sheds. The only



human being in sight was a shepherd, who seemed but a microscopic black dot in the clear air far away up the valley, on the opposite side. Staines wondered what had become of the professor.

The parasol lay on the ground. He picked it up, but found it impossible to put on the nob again. He hurried after the other two. "Mrs Keston," he said, "you have left your parasol behind. You dropped it on the ground and the handle is broken." He handed her the sunshade and the knob.

Denise had not noticed the breaking of the parasol. When she saw Staines give it to her mother, the meaning of the broken screw and hollow handle flashed upon her. She had not known of this method before. She broke out anew into tears.

As for her mother, even then she did not realise what the broken sunshade meant. She did not snatch at it this time, but merely waved it aside, and continued her shrill scolding of her daughter. So Staines had perforce to carry the parasol.

Suddenly he remembered the sketch book. They had not gone far—not more than twenty yards. He ran back and began to look searchingly at the river. The stream was choked with boulders, round and over which the water splashed, leaped, and darted—almost it seemed in ironical mockery of the liquor-maddened woman on the bank. The sketch book was wedged in between two rocks, and fortunately was scarcely wet save for a few stray drops. Staines made his way out to it, using the scattered stones of the river bed to step upon, took up the book, and went back after the other two. Denise had seen, and she gave him a look of grateful appreciation.

They walked on. Mrs Keston still clutched the girl's arm. Denise had by now repressed her tears, and her lips were set in a firm, agonised resolve. She had made no resistance to her mother when the latter had thrown away her sketch book. She made no resistance now, knowing it was useless.

Mrs Keston's mood was changing.

Three minutes before she had been angry and excited. She was still voluble, but she was growing mournful with liquor-stricken apprehension. She was saying, "Why doesn't he come back? I do hope he isn't killed. Why do people go and climb mountains? Where is my husband? I saw him not long ago, and now I cannot see him anywhere," and she began to sob stertorously.

It was a heart-shattering sight to see this woman, this lady, who had been as beautiful and charming as her daughter, now ravaged and wrecked, body and mind, by drink.

Soon, however, she began to grow languid and sleepy. The heat, the exertion, and the excitement, combined with the brandy, had produced the inevitable reaction. As they were passing through a pine wood she sank heavily to the ground. Staines grasped her arm, and, together with Denise, moved her from the path and supported her against a tree trunk. Her head fell forward. She was asleep.

The sunbeams struck slanting athwart the foliage and lit up the white face, now no longer flushed; lit up the hair which had once been soft and tinted with all the shades of summer, but now was faded and seamed with grey; lit up the drooping loosened figure which had once been lithe and supple. From the grass came a continual chirping of grasshoppers, joyous that summer was not yet over. From a meadow above the wood floated to them the cheerful disordered music of cattle bells. Down below, the river rushed noisily along, the gleam of its water in the sun being perceptible through the trees. And over all, round all, and through all, was the glorious invigorating sun-smitten atmosphere.

Staines and Denise looked at each other without speaking. There was no need to say anything. It was a miserable ending for a walk that had begun so well. What were they to do? While they were thinking helplessly, in silence, they again heard footsteps approaching. This time it was the professor.

He came up the path towards them as rapidly as he could. It was evident that he had been hurrying. He was streaming with perspiration, and as he walked he dug his iron-shod stick into the ground with the vicious vigour that betokens an exhausted man. Suddenly he caught sight of the little group by the pine tree. He took in the situation at a glance, stumbled, and nearly fell as he saw his wife. He stopped short. There was a dead silence for nearly half a minute, a blank unfortunate silence.

Then Staines came forward and said, "Professor, your wife was walking with us when she became ill and fell down. We were wondering what was best to be done when you so opportunely arrived."

"Thank you. Thank you, Mr Staines," said the professor. "No doubt the heat and the exertion overcame her. We must rouse her and get her back between us. How shall we revive her? Some water perhaps"—and he looked round. He was painfully nervous.

"Let me go and get some from the river,"

answered Staines. "It's not difficult to climb down to it. But how shall I carry the water up? We have no cup or anything." He paused. He could not ask the professor if he had a flask on him. "Ah, I know, I'll gather a handful of grass and leaves, and damp them."

And he began to clamber down the steep bank. As he went, he tried to imagine what had happened on that morning at the hotel. Had there been a scene? Or had Mrs Keston rushed out by herself before her husband was ready? Probably the latter.

He gathered a handful of clean sweet grass and broad moist leaves, which grew in the undergrowth, dipped them in the water, and climbed back on to the path. He gave the leaves and grass to the professor, who sponged his wife's forehead and face with them, while Denise shook her gently. Mrs Keston opened her eyes and stared round vacantly. "Ah, it's you, William," she said. Then she began to go to sleep again. Roused once more, she

staggered to her feet, yawning and muttering. The professor supported her on one side, Staines took her arm on the other, and in this way they began to lead her down the path. They almost carried her at first, for she was but half able to walk.

Denise followed them behind, alone. Her eyes were red with crying, but she did not utterly break down. She was wrung with shame and distress. There had been violent scenes with her mother before. This was not the first time she had suffered, but never before had she broken out in the presence of anyone save the professor, or occasionally Colonel de Zouchy. The latter was well acquainted with Mrs Keston's besetting vice. Indeed he traded on it by worrying her to compel her daughter to marry him. Sometimes, when she had not been drinking, sometimes even when she had, Mrs Keston sympathised with her daughter. But it was not for long. And as she gradually grew more and more the slave of drams, Colmar de Zouchy obtained a greater and more lasting command over

her will. There were times when Denise's life was made perfectly intolerable. But all the while, beyond her mother, beyond the colonel, there lay a yet more terrible shadow for her. And as she went along the path behind her father, her mother, and Mortimer Staines, whenever she looked at the latter the thought ran through her mind like a refrain, "He thinks he knows why I am miserable, and he pities me. He does know half. Would he pity me so if he knew all?" And there was no answer save the indifferent chirping of the grasshoppers and the brawling of the river.

Staines and the professor said nothing to each other as they helped Mrs Keston along. She was looking about her with a vacant stare, muttering and occasionally breaking out into articulate speech. All sorts of disordered and disconnected ideas seemed to be chasing one another through her brain.

"Where is the colonel? We shall be late for *table-d'hôte*. Where are we now? Ah, you, Denise, are you there? What do you mean by writing to that young man?"



Mr Staines, sha'n't we enjoy ourselves this afternoon? But I'm afraid I sha'n't be able to go, I've such a headache. It is so hot." Suddenly she said, "Where is my parasol? Ah, so good of you to carry it for me, Mr Staines. Thank you so much." Then she noticed the broken handle. The meaning dawned on her as her brain became clearer with the freshness of the air. Staines was carrying the parasol and the knob in his left hand while he supported her with his right.

Mrs Keston became more and more lucid. She had the sense not to say anything more about the broken sunshade; and the professor noticed nothing, he was too much absorbed in his thoughts.

This parasol was becoming a problem to Staines. It was hardly possible to return it to Mrs Keston when they reached the hotel—her husband would almost certainly be with her the whole time. Then the professor ought surely to know about it. Staines therefore decided to return it to the husband as soon as Mrs Keston was off the scene.

It was a weary journey back to the hotel. At last they reached the bridge at the corner across the Marl. By this time Mrs Keston was able to walk unaided. She was still a little uncertain and dizzy, but not obviously so. She looked fearfully pale and exhausted, and complained again and again of a splitting headache.

Some minutes later they arrived at the hotel. *Déjeuner* was over. The French father and mother were sitting on the verandah, and looked curiously at them as they passed inside.

Mrs Keston went to her room almost immediately. Her husband was about to follow her when Staines stopped him until she was out of sight, then he said, "Professor, here is your wife's parasol. She dropped it this morning. I am afraid the handle is broken."

Professor Keston understood at once when he saw the parasol. He took it, saying simply, "Thank you," and followed his wife upstairs. Meanwhile his daughter retired also. Staines heard his two German

acquaintances talking in the smoking-room. He went in and apologised to them for being late, promising to make the best speed he could with his lunch, so that they might start as soon as possible.

On the verandah of the hotel, madam observed to monsieur, "Je crois que la dame anglaise se trouve bien malade."

Her husband looked at her steadily for a moment, pursed his lips, half smiled, shook his head slowly from side to side, and completed the pantomime by a wholly Gallic shrug.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE GEILENPFAD

AFTER lunch Staines set out for the Geilenpfad with the two Germans.

Their names were Michel Hofner and Walter Kranz—noisy, jovial fellows; Hofner about twenty-six years old, and his friend Kranz bordering on thirty. Their company was very congenial to Staines after the strain of the morning, and he found a pleasant reaction in entering freely into their conversation. There was an infectious and welcome *camaraderie* about them. They infected him with their good spirits.

From a conversational point of view the German language seemed to Staines to be easier than French, by reason of the more emphatic distinctness of each word. He had no fluent command over German, but he was very well able to make himself understood.

He spoke English to the proprietor of the Hotel Helsenhorn merely because Elias Waldener had first addressed him in that language and because he knew how Switzers delight to air their linguistic knowledge. As for Hofner and Kranz, their command over English was limited to two phrases. Therefore the conversation was carried on in German.

Presently Hofner observed, "It was a very distressing thing that happened this morning at the hotel."

Staines knew at once what he meant. He said simply, "What?"

"Madame Keston. We were standing in the doorway, Walter and I, when we heard her coming downstairs muttering to herself. She rushed past us, pushing us aside without apologising, and out of the hotel she went. But what was so strange was the way she looked; her eyes were so staring. She was so rude too. I remember just outside the hotel she stopped and tried to open her parasol. It would not be opened, and Walter here went and offered to open it

for her. She pushed him away, and walked off down the path struggling with the parasol. We thought she must be ill with the heat or something."

And then Kranz struck in with,—

"Yes, and after a while out runs Mr Keston, and asks us, in a great state of excitement, if we have seen his wife. We tell him that she has gone out by herself, and show him the direction. He runs off for his hat and stick, and then away he goes as fast as ever he can after her. And then later on you all come back together."

Mortimer Staines listened in silence. When Kranz had finished, Hofner remarked, "I think the young English lady is one of the prettiest girls I have ever seen. I envied you your walk with her this morning, Herr Staines."

"But how sad she looked as she came back into the hotel," said Kranz. "Poor girl! I am sure her mother must cause her a great deal of distress."

"My opinion is that her mother is what the French describe as *névrose originelle*.

What do you think, Mein Herr?" Hofner asked.

"I am not sure," said Staines, dubiously, and then changed the conversation.

They reached Feldenhofen. It was a small village, smaller than Marlenberg, and without either shop, post-office or hotel. The only important edifice was the quaint little church with its minaret-like steeple. The houses all around were mere wooden châteaux.

Here Staines, Hofner and Kranz began to ascend to the south up the rocky banks of a stream which leaped down to join the Marl. The path became very rough, and soon diminished to the vague semblance of a track. On the right were thin groups of trees dominated by storm-shattered crags, and further on a gleaming mountain, named the Schielhorn, rose against the blue.

It was nearly-half past three o'clock. There were nearly four hours of daylight remaining. The three men had arrived at the rock-piled heaps of snow-patched *débris* which marked the limit of vegetation. On

their left the steep Klampenhorn towered up. The whole mountain seemed as if it had been built negligently by Titans. Tier upon tier of gigantic, weather-worn, rounded rocks were tossed together in disorder. There was an impressive grimness about the scene. Staines thought of Scott's description of Ben Venue:—

“. . . in masses threw  
Craggs, knolls and mounds confusedly hurled,  
The fragments of an earlier world.”

“It has always seemed to me,” he remarked, “that there is considerable danger to anyone climbing alone in these regions. A slip on one of those rocks up there, or even here where we are now, and you might sprain your ankle and be unable to move.”

“Yes,” answered Hofner, “and then it is terribly cold at night. Just think that perhaps nobody might come near while you were lying helpless. You might be frozen or even starve. It is conceivable.”

“That is why,” put in Kranz, “I think it



is inadvisable to climb alone. It is not so much the risk of big, serious accidents. A little mishap, like spraining the ankle, as you say, might be enough for you ; whereas with two or three in a party it is always safe."

Hofner was looking up at the Klampenhorn.

"I wonder," said he, "if we should need the rope to climb that mountain there. I had thought of attempting it this afternoon. But I suppose there would not have been time, and then also, if there really was need of a rope, we have not one with us."

"Yes," answered Staines, "I think we had better be content with the Geilenpfad for to-day."

By this time they were walking upon snow. It could hardly be called eternal snow, although it never melted save in exceptionally hot years, and after long spells of drought. But by reason of the sheltering heights on both sides of the defile the sun's rays were not so effective as on more exposed parts. This year the

storms at the end of August had been particularly violent, and once or twice snow had been known to fall as low as two thousand metres above the sea.

The Geilenpfad began to be less steep as the party ascended. They were still a long way from the summit of the pass. Above, on the right, on the Schielhorn, could be seen the blue and white of a small glacier. The sun was lower in the sky and the air was gradually growing cooler.

"I do not believe we shall have time to get right up the pass to-day," said Kranz. "We can't be in time for *table-d'hôte* this evening as it is. Anyhow, we've had a good walk. What do you say to sitting down for a rest and a smoke?"

"I think that wouldn't be a bad idea," Staines replied. Hofner thought so too. The three sat down, having found a fairly comfortable seat on a large flat rock, just where the slope of the Klampenhorn made an angle with the floor of the defile. The smoke of Staine's pipe and of the cigars of Hofner and Kranz curled up and wavered,

twisting in the gentle breeze in delicate blue-brown spirals. A small cloud brushed the summit of the Schielhorn. It seemed as if the mountain itself were indulging in a mild cigarette.

Suddenly Staines said, "Did you hear that noise?"

"No," the others answered. "What was it?"

"It sounded like a shout. Some shepherd, I expect. There it is again. But a shepherd would hardly be up on the rocks of the Klampenhorn. There—do you hear that now?"

From the direction indicated came a faint wind-wafted shout, then another. Then the cry—inarticulate at first—framed itself into the English word "Help."

"Somebody is in difficulties," said Staines. "I distinctly heard a shout for help. We must go and see what is the matter?"

The cry came again. They roared a response—Hofner and Kranz in German, Staines in English. "All right, we hear you."

They began to climb up the rock piles of the Klampenhorn, in a series of leaps from boulder to boulder, with imminent risk to themselves, at the rate they were going, of sprained limbs.

The cries, which were repeated again and again, seemed to issue from a height some hundreds of feet up the mountain. But they could see nothing. The sufferer, whoever he might be, was concealed from sight.

They stopped a moment and looked about. Kranz was carrying a pair of field-glasses slung over his shoulder. He pulled them out and directed them towards the place whence the sounds seemed to come. He said, "I can't see anything, can you?" and handed the glasses to Staines. The latter, after a pause, replied slowly, "No, I can see nothing."

Again a shout rose into the air. It was louder now, and therefore probably nearer. They advanced across the rocks.

The shouts ceased. All at once a huge detached mass larger than its companions blocked the way. The giant was perhaps

twenty feet high and nearly a hundred in girth, rounded and smoothed. It was necessary to go leftward to pass. On the other side Hofner nearly fell into a deep dark crevice between the boulder and a lesser neighbour. He only just saved himself. Suddenly he gave a startled guttural exclamation and beckoned excitedly to his companions. They all bent down and peered into the hole. There lay the motionless figure of a man who had fainted. Staines, Hofner and Kranz succeeded somehow in hauling him out into daylight. He was a young man, twenty-four years of age, it might be, with a clever, well-featured face and a light moustache. He was dressed in a grey tweed suit with a Norfolk jacket, and his hat was Tyrolese of the usual mountaineering style, knickerbockers, stockings, and heavy, many-nailed boots.

Mortimer Staines recognised him at once. It was the young journalist whose acquaintance he had made at the Schweizerhof—Geoffrey Vane - Wenston. The breeze, blowing across the unconscious man's face,

revived him. He made an effort to sit up. Then falling back uneasily he said,—

“I am awfully grateful to you. You have saved my life. By to-morrow morning I expect I should have been frozen. It’s cold at night up here. I slipped on that rock there, sprained my ankle and bruised my head badly falling into that hole you have just pulled me out of.”

“When was this?” Staines asked.

“Hullo! why I met you at Lucerne. How do you do, Mr Staines? Never expected to find you here. You’re stopping at Marlenberg, I suppose?”

“I am.”

“That’s where I was going this morning. Came over the Geilenpfad from Baceno. Been doing a little tour south for the last week. Thought I could do the Klampenhorn on my way, and—well, here I am.”

They lifted him up. Staines took his feet while the other two supported him by each shoulder, and in this way, with many slips and stoppages, they carried him down to the Geilenpfad. There they stopped

breathless and rested awhile. Staines informed the two Germans that the young man was bound for the Hotel Helsenhorn; so they decided to carry him down to Feldenhofen, and there hire a mule to convey him the rest of the way.

"Many people stopping at Marlenberg?" Vane-Wenston asked.

"No; very few in fact. It's late in the season."

"How many?"

"Twelve in all. These two gentlemen here—Herr Hofner and Herr Kranz (they saluted one another as they were introduced); a French family of five; three English people beside myself, and a retired colonel of the French infantry. I think those are all."

"Who are the English people?"

"Professor Keston, the authority on ancient Carthage, and his wife and daughter."

"You don't say so. Why, I know them. How long have they been here?"

"I don't know. They were there when I arrived the day before yesterday."

"Well, I seem to have fallen among friends. The world is a small place, as they say."

"Just here it looks fairly roomy."

"All the more crowded elsewhere."

"It's getting late," said Staines, "we must be going on. Can you manage on one leg, if we prop you up on both sides? It's a fair distance down."

"I'll try."

And so they began to make their way down. Vane-Wenston's ankle caused him considerable pain, and every now and then there had to be a rest. But gradually they advanced. Staines took his turn, first with one and then with the other of the Germans, to help the crippled man.

The sun was dropping down behind the western mountains, and the shadows were creeping over the Marienthal when the little party reached Feldenhofen. It struck Staines as a curious coincidence that in the morning he had escorted home Denise's mother, and now in the evening that he was helping to carry home her



lover, or probably her lover. "The situation develops," he said to himself.

At Feldenhofen they made inquiries with a view to hiring a mule to carry Vane-Wenston the rest of the way. After some searching they discovered a man who owned a mule and who was willing to let it for the work. The young man was lifted on to the animal, and the party set off down the path for the last stage of their journey. The peace of a calm evening was over the valley.

"I suppose you crossed over to the Italian side from Lucerne?" Staines asked Vane-Wenston.

"Yes. I went across the St Gothard *viâ* Fluelen. Got as far south as the other end of the Lago Maggiore, then to Domo d'Ossola, and up the Val d'Antigorio to Baceno, stayed there awhile, and then heard of this pass and started off across it. You know the rest."

"Any copy?"

"Some material for a few little sketches. But nothing important."

“You say you know the Kestons?”

“Very well indeed. I’ve stopped with them at their place. They live in London, Lancaster Gate. I’ve known them some years. I was at school with Professor Keston’s son. We were great chums. He’s dead, poor chap. Died of appendicitis. Took him off in a week. By the way, I think you said a French colonel was staying at the hotel there. Is that Colonel de Zouchy?”

“Yes, he’s been away to-day and yesterday on a mountain expedition in the Oberland. I expect he’ll be back by the time we get there. Do you know him?”

“Slightly; we’ve met, that’s all.” And he was silent. They reached the hotel. As they drew up near the verandah, Denise stood leaning over the balustrade. At that moment a man with an ice-axe came up from the opposite direction. It was the colonel of the Foreign Legion.

## CHAPTER V

### DENISE

MRS KESTON, as soon as she was in her room, lay down on the bed and slept heavily. Her husband entered soon after. He looked at her a moment as she lay there pallid and dishevelled. Then he groaned.

He was wrought up to a pitch of nervous excitement and anger surpassing former occasions. Incident upon incident, scene upon scene accumulating, and, above all, at an hotel, were ruining his nerves. Easy-going as he was, self-centred as he was, the events of the morning had shattered his equability. Almost within forty-eight hours his wife had been intoxicated, sodden and hysterical, four times.

She had been drinking on the afternoon of the Indian civil servant's arrival; and

in the evening, when she had somewhat recovered, she had answered her husband's reproaches by a torrent of shrill and vulgar abuse. The professor had long ago realised that the power of alcohol not only dissolves a soul, but coarsens the most refined brain in an incredible manner. Staines, going upstairs to dress for dinner, had heard her.

The following morning she had contrived, in some manner unknown to the professor, to obtain more liquor. Staines had noticed her after breakfast, and again in the wood. In the evening there had been the incident with the French child, and later, on her recovery, another scene with her husband.

And now there were the events of that very morning. The previous day she had not been absolutely drunk, but in a state of feverish liquor-maddened excitement. This day marked a far more terrible stage. The situation was becoming horrible and quite impossible. The professor wondered whether the other visitors besides Staines — who obviously must know — and the

servants had divined anything. She was growing worse and worse. She had been more or less addicted to this ghastly habit for two years. But lately the chains had been tightening more inexorably about her. Where would, what must be the end? And Professor Keston shuddered and dared not answer even to himself.

And then there was the parasol. After receiving it from Staines the professor broke it in half as he went upstairs. He examined the mechanism of the interior. To him also this was a new device. Then, not knowing what to do with the broken pieces (for if he threw them away they might be found again), he packed them at the bottom of his portmanteau, out of sight for ultimate destruction. When he had done this, he went down to the dining-room and ordered something to eat, for he had missed his lunch. Afterwards, in order to rest and distract his mind, he took his books and papers out on to the verandah and temporarily found peace in the Republic of ancient Carthage. He was reading *Salammbó* for

the first time, and it pleased and soothed him to find Flaubert wrong in minor details here and there.

Upstairs in her room Denise sat at the open window looking across the valley. She was not hungry, although she had had nothing to eat since the morning. She was too unhappy to think of food.

The sunlit valley smiled, heartlessly, it seemed to her, smiled in all the glory of a gorgeous afternoon. The pines murmured in the breeze. The river rushed noisily along. In the distance the scornful mountains lifted their flashing minarets of rock and shining domes of snow. Now and then came the indistinct sound of voices or laughter, half heard from the little village. Everywhere, peace.

Beneath, on the verandah, she could see her father as he sat there with his books. Below her, in a room on the first floor, she knew that her mother was lying in a heavy sleep.

The French family were out on an

excursion. De Zouchy was still away. Staines and the Germans were absent for the afternoon. The hotel seemed deserted.

Denise soliloquised, "I wonder how much longer I shall endure this sort of life. I shall end by going mad, I think. This morning — oh poor, poor mother — oh, but I won't think about that any more. I daren't. Thinking doesn't do any good; and yet I can't prevent myself thinking. How I hate him! I wish, oh! I wish he'd get killed on the Aletschhorn. Ah, yes, its wicked, I know, to wish that—and yet—and yet—oh, God help me! I can't help it. Do I hate him? I used to like him before he fell in love with me. Why do men fall in love? Why did he fall in love with me? He has known me ever since I can remember. Does he *love* me? If he did he wouldn't use mother to get at me as he does. If he didn't do that I shouldn't hate him. I'd like him though I couldn't love him, if only he behaved like a man, like a gentleman. Poor mother!"

Suddenly she noticed her sketch book which was lying on a chair near her, the same book which Mortimer Staines had rescued that morning.

“Ah, Geoffrey, I love you. But I dare not think—I dare not think. Oh, God, if the colonel knew — if mother knew all. Poor mother, she accused me of writing to you this morning. Is it only accident your being in Switzerland? Why haven't you answered my last letter? I only found out that you were in Switzerland this morning. Oh, if you were to cease loving me I think it would kill me. God pity me.

“But it's no use to sit here like this thinking. It won't mend matters. Perhaps a stroll in the valley will cheer me up.” She went downstairs. Elias Waldener was standing in the passage and sorting a bundle of letters.

“Goot afternoon, mademoiselle, here is a letter for you. Eet vas just come.”

“Thank you, Mr Waldener,” and she took the letter and passed out.



"Where are you going to?" said her father as she crossed the verandah.

"Only for a short stroll up the valley. I can't think of anything else to do. I'm not in a humour for reading. Will you come too, papa?"

"I think not. I am feeling rather tired. I shall stay here and read. If you will come back at half-past four, we will have afternoon tea together."

"I shall enjoy that. I'll be sure to come back. *Au revoir* then, for the present."

She walked slowly along the path through the village and up the valley in the same direction in which Staines and the two Germans had gone about an hour before.

As she walked Denise opened the letter. The envelope was post-marked Luzern and again post-marked London. The handwriting of the original address was that of Geoffrey Vane-Wenston. The letter had been sent to the house in Lancaster Gate and forwarded from there to the Hotel Helsenhorn. She tore it open and read:—

“SCHWEIZERHOF, LUCERNE,  
*Sunday, August 26.*”

“MY DEAR DENISE,—I know you are in Switzerland. But since I have not the faintest idea where, I am writing to your town address in the hope that this will be forwarded.

“I was delighted to get your letter just before you left. I suppose you gave me no Swiss address because you did not yourself know where you would be stopping.

“I have been continually wondering whether I shall come across you. I always make a point of asking, wherever I go, what English people are staying there.

“Do you remember Sea View this time last year? We were very happy together then. I doubt if we shall ever enjoy another time like that, what with your people who object, and my want of money, which is their principal objection.

“I have been thinking lately that it would be better for us to consider our

engagement dissolved. The fact is, I cannot afford to marry—I shall not be able to for another six years at least, at the rate I am going now. I feel it is unjust to expect you to wait for me all that time. I swear to you that, when I have money (and sooner or later I shall and must make my mark), if we love each other as we do now, I will come and claim you. But suppose you meet somewhere somebody you prefer to me, someone who could support you in a way that at present I can not, would it not be wrong of me to stand in your way? For God's sake, do not think me heartless. It is in despair and all sincerity that I am writing this, and God knows how at a loss I am to put it decently. It is you I am thinking about, not myself.

“If you will write to the Schweizerhof as soon as you get this, they will forward on to me.—Your despairing and devoted lover,

“GEOFFREY VANE-WENSTON.”

She finished reading the letter. The paper felt in her hands like branding flame. A hot mist was before her eyes, and a ringing in her ears. She was deadly white, and her breath came in short, quick gasps. She began to walk hurriedly along, unconscious of everything, her mind a dull dead blank.

She felt a need, a mad longing to get off the main path, to rush away somewhere, bury herself in the pine forests, anywhere. She began to climb feverishly up through the steep woods on the right, stumbling here and there, careless of direction. Soon she was exhausted, and sank down on the ground, crying.

The soft beauty of nature, unbroken here by the vision of austere cliffs, insensibly soothed her. She began to think. She read the letter through again in a hopeless endeavour to find hope in it. There was bitterness in the memory of his former letters, even of the last before this one. Those other letters of his had been like hers, warm and passionate, breathing in every line

the love and hope of eternal youth. And now this letter seemed to her to be an atrocity of cynicism and cruel, smirking selfishness.

“Is it all?” she asked herself. “Is this the end? I suppose he makes a point of asking what English people are stopping at any place in order to avoid me. Ah, what have I done, what have I done to deserve this? Oh, Geoffrey, Geoffrey, you can’t afford, you say, to marry. I might meet someone I should prefer to you. Oh, my love, when I would wait for you for ever! I don’t think you realise that, when you ask if it would not be wrong to expect me to wait. To wait how long? Six years! You say that you write in all sincerity and despair; that it is for my sake. You even invite me to write back to you, to accept your kind invitation. Geoffrey, you heartless coward, I hate you. I loathe you, I loathe these mountains and this country because you are somewhere in it. Yet, ah, how I love you, how I love you!

“Do I remember Sea View this time last

year. Do I remember? Do I remember anything? Is all that forgotten? Is it because all danger is past now that you imagine, oh, that you rightly imagine, that you can be tired of me with impunity? Geoffrey, the colonel compared to you is a lion beside a worm, and I love, my God! I love the worm. You, Geoffrey, do you understand? you, you! Ah, heaven, I am afraid, oh, how I am afraid of these silent woods and hills. I would give my soul to be away from them, to be in town, to be dead, anywhere but here. Ah, these mountains, they make me think, make me think of a year ago. The summer makes me think of a year ago. And I am afraid to think, I daren't think. Oh, God, deliver me."

Rent by the frenzied force of her emotion she rose to her feet, tore the letter into fragments and dashed it on the ground; then she picked up the scattered pieces and crushed them in her clenched hands. She almost fainted, and was obliged to clutch at a friendly pine tree for support.

Then came the reaction. She threw herself down on the ground again and burst into a passionate storm of tears.

Little by little she grew calmer and regained self-command. A dull gnawing pain succeeded to the flaming agony of a few moments before.

She looked at her watch. It was four o'clock. She descended through the woods and returned along the Marlenberg path. On the other side of the valley she caught sight of the green, rounded Engenhorn, and thought of Mortimer Staines. "Ah, if he knew the whole story, would he pity me as he does now?"

The professor was still sitting on the verandah when she arrived at the hotel. He was thinking of his wife, for he had found it impossible to concentrate himself for more than one consecutive hour on his books. Her image rose always before him. The thought tormented him that what had happened was largely his own fault for not having put sufficient restraint upon her hitherto. He had been too careless and

easy-going. He ought never to have brought her to Switzerland, and yet, could he have anticipated this? He thought bitterly that he might have done so with a little more trouble and observation. Previously he had contented himself with reproaching her afterwards. He ought never to have let the reason for such reproaches arise. What few preventive attempts he had made she had continually succeeded in baffling. In London once or twice her conduct had given rise to slight scandal. Never had it been as bad as now. What would next happen at this hotel? Suppose there was another scene with the French family. The latter would almost certainly complain to the proprietor. Although the foreign visitors had not yet divined the cause of Mrs Keston's appearance and behaviour, they must certainly do so soon, unless he, the professor, took steps to prevent it. Well, he would act, and that speedily. That very evening he would find out somehow all his wife's methods, and checkmate them, and also find some way to



restrain her. It was a difficult problem; he would get the colonel to help. That very evening.

"Ah, there you are, Denise," he said as she came up the steps. She had by now recovered complete control over herself.

"Yes, here I am, papa. Shall we have tea out here?"

"That would be a very good idea, I think. You might go inside and order it, will you?"

Denise went in and ordered tea. Then she came out and took an easy-chair beside her father. They sat there for some minutes in silence.

Elias Waldener himself brought out the tea.

"Ah, Waldener," said the professor, "I am thinking of ascending the Schönhorn tomorrow with my family. We need a guide, I believe."

"Oh, yes, zere vas need of a guide. Ze Schönhorn he vas not safe by himself."

Denise smiled at the quaint phrase. The professor said, "I was about to ask you if you would accompany us yourself—that

is to say, if you could possibly spare the time."

"Vell, I dink I could. Ve should vant ze whole day for ze climb. But zere are so few veesitors now. And mine young bruder, he vould look after ze hotel. Yes, I vould like to come vere much."

"That's good. Very good. What time ought we to start?"

"I should say at five hours—five o'clock. You could have some coffee and someding to eed at half-past four."

"Very well, that is what we will do. I am very glad you are able to come with us. We ought to have a very enjoyable day."

"Oh, yes, ve shall enjoy ourselves," and Elias went into the hotel.

The professor remarked, "I much prefer being conducted by him to having an ordinary guide whom we have never seen before. And then I don't think there are any real guides in this remote village. At anyrate we should have a lot of trouble in getting one."

"Yes," answered his daughter. "I am glad Elias Waldener can come. He is such a dear, with his quaint way of talking. Did you hear him say the Schönhorn, 'vas not safe by himself.' It was such a funny way of putting it."

During tea Professor Keston and Denise endeavoured to conceal their inner thoughts beneath a flow of light conversation with only partial success. Every now and then there was a break, a silence. The professor could not keep his mind away from his wife. His daughter felt utterly weary of everything. A dull heavy despair lay upon her. But at intervals, like lightning through a black storm cloud, a sudden shaft of pain passed through her brain like a spear.

"After tea time dragged wearily. The professor felt a gathering uneasiness as the time approached for action in regard to his wife. Once he went to their room, and, finding her still fast asleep, heaved a sigh of relief, and went down again to his books. After ten minutes of aimless fumbling with

the leaves, and of looking at the pages with eyes that saw nothing, he went upstairs again and began to search all his wife's effects for the purpose of finding out whether there were any more devices similar to that of the parasol. He discovered a leathern purse which contained a tiny flask cunningly concealed in the interior. He found several silver stoppered flasks of cut glass resembling scent bottles. Some of these were brought to light from pockets in whatever dresses belonging to Mrs Keston he was able to find. Some lay packed beneath clothes in her portmanteau. In her trunk he found a false bottom. Lifting this, he saw half-a-dozen glass bottles, not round, but flat-sided and narrow, so as to lie properly packed. Between the bottles was a padding of cotton wool to prevent cracking and collision. Four of these bottles were full. They bore the name of a distillery at Berne, but there was nothing to show where they had been bought. Mrs Keston might have obtained them at any small town

through which she and the professor had recently passed, perhaps at Grindelwald or Meiringen. The Kestons had been less than a week at Marlenberg.

As the professor discovered these contrivances one after the other, so his wrath rose until it was all he could do to contain himself. He emptied every bottle, and collected them all together, packed them, as he had packed the broken sunshade, into one of his portmanteaus, which he filled up with various clothes and other articles that he did not absolutely require. Then he securely locked and strapped the portmanteau, but was at a loss where to put it. He would not trust it, even locked, in the same room with his wife. At last he decided to carry it upstairs to his daughter's room. She would know nothing about the contents, and it might remain there until they left.

He carried the portmanteau up to the floor above and knocked at the door of Denise's room. There was an answer from the interior, "Come in."

As he entered he caught sight of his daughter sitting by the window. She turned round and said, "Why, papa, is there anything I can do for you?"

"Only if you would not mind keeping this somewhere in your room for the present, it takes up so much space in ours. Do you object?"

"Oh, not at all, papa. By all means put it up here. It will stay quite well in that corner there, I think."

She helped her father to deposit the portmanteau in a corner. It was neither large nor heavy and did not cost them much effort. The professor had easily carried it, tightly packed though it was.

After the professor was gone, Denise returned to her seat at the window and sat staring out dully across the Marienthal. She sat there until the bell rang for dinner.

## CHAPTER VI

### COLMAR DE ZOUCHY

"HERE we are at the hotel," said Mortimer Staines as the party drew up, tired and weary from their exertions. "I'd better go in and tell the landlord about you, Mr Vane-Wenston. I'll arrange to get ready a room for you so that you may have as little discomfort as possible."

He left them and began to ascend the steps. Denise had disappeared. She had been standing on the verandah when Staines spoke, and had heard the name "Vane-Wenston." She went straightway to her room, and threw herself on her bed, her face buried in the pillow, crying.

Staines had just reached the doorway when the colonel set foot on the verandah. The Frenchman had not noticed the two Germans standing by the man on the mule at the other side.

“Ah, Mr Staines, that you? It was a grand climb, the Aletschhorn. What have you been doing to-day?”

“Just now I have been assisting a disabled man, whom we found senseless with a sprained ankle on the Geilenpfad side of the Klampenhorn.”

“Mon Dieu, a pleasant exercise that. But tell me about it.”

“In a moment. I must just see the landlord first, and make a few arrangements.”

When Waldener was found, Staines explained to him what had happened. A room was prepared at once, and Vane-Wenston was lifted off the mule and carried up to it. There he was made comfortable, after which Staines and the two Germans left him enjoying a good supper, and went down to their own meal.

It was nearly nine o'clock. Colonel de Zouchy had already begun to eat his supper when the three men entered the dining-room. They were thoroughly hungry, and fell to and ate heartily.



While they were eating, Mortimer Staines gave the Frenchman an account of the afternoon's occurrence.

"Parbleu!" said Colmar de Zouchy, when he had been told everything. "It was a very fortunate thing that you happened to hear him shouting before he fainted. Sometimes no one passes that way for days on end, and he might have easily have been starved or frozen. But you have not told me his name?"

"His name is Vane-Wenston. He is a young English journalist."

"But I think I have met him. I can't quite remember where — the name is familiar to me. To-morrow, my friend, you will introduce us. Is it not so?"

"Why certainly, if you like. He is a clever sort of man, and you may find him entertaining. And now I should like to hear about your ascent."

"Ah, that was a grand climb, my friend, a grand climb. Snow perfect, weather perfect, everything perfect. You know, the Aletschhorn is the highest of the

Bernese Oberland, with one exception, and that is the Finsteraarhorn. It is quite difficult, and I, I will admit I found it a trifle tiring. But then I am stiffer in the joints than I was formerly. I reached the Hotel Jungfrau on the Eggishorn yesterday afternoon — but I fear our friends here will be bored at this recital?”

“They can’t speak English,” said Staines. Hofner and Kranz were listening in silence, feeling themselves somewhat outside the conversation because of their ignorance of the language.

“Is that so? You can speak German, I suppose? Yes?”

The colonel apologised briefly to Hofner and Kranz in their native tongue, of which he was a master, and put them all at their ease by continuing his narrative fluently in German.

He was still talking when they finished supper. They were passing out of the dining-room just as Professor Keston came downstairs.

“I hope I am not interrupting you,

colonel," said the professor, "but might I speak to you a minute?"

"But certainly, my dear professor." He turned and made his excuses to the others, and accompanied the professor into the salon. There sat the French family.

"Let us just stroll up and down outside; we can talk better there." They went out, and, as they paced slowly up and down in front of the hotel, the professor related the events of the day so far as Mrs Keston was concerned.

"I mean," said he, "to take serious steps now, after this. And I wanted your advice and help. I am afraid that hitherto I have been somewhat lax in the matter. I ought never to have let things go so far as they have done."

"Assuredly it is very serious. You did well, I think, in removing all those bottles and things. That will prevent her getting any more brandy for the present. But how will you prevent her in the future. You must not let her have any money, or only the very smallest amount possible."

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“I think that can be arranged,” replied the other slowly. “I shall, of course, not say anything to her about my removal of the flasks. And I think that she herself will hardly presume to mention it to me. At least, so long as she is not intoxicated—good God!”

“And then you must never leave her here at the hotel, or anywhere if possible by herself. She must accompany you on all excursions. And climbing these mountains here will not hurt her the least in the world, possibly it will do her much good. The air is magnificent.”

“You are right, and indeed I have arranged with Elias Waldener about an ascent of the Schönhorn to-morrow. My wife shall go with us—even if she does not go to the top.”

“Do you think she will find herself well enough to accompany you to-morrow?”

“Oh, I should think so. You see, she has slept all this afternoon, and is sleeping now. She woke up about eight o'clock and I ordered some food for her. She seemed to

have a fair appetite. Soon afterwards she undressed and went to bed."

"Madame is to be congratulated on having a fine constitution. But the drink has had its effect on her; certainly it has had its effect on her appearance."

"Do you think I ought to say anything to her to-morrow about—about this matter? A word of kindly admonishment perhaps?"

"Assuredly not. Say nothing, my dear friend; you must use the iron hand in the velvet glove. If she has good sense, and we know she has good sense, your wife will see the wisdom of our arrangements even while she tries to oppose them. I hope you will not mind my saying it, but I think you have done more harm than good already in making lectures to her. Believe me, professor, you and I, we will pull Mrs Keston out of the fire. But we must be, we must have tact, as you English say."

"Well, I am immensely grateful to you for your sympathy. To-morrow morning then, and early, I will arouse her, unless she wakes

before, and explain about the Schönhorn. I will say I told her yesterday. She will not remember, and it will be a harmless fiction. Now, colonel, good-night, and thank you again. I am feeling rather tired, so I propose to go to bed."

He went in. The colonel stood still looking up at the black forms of the mountains outlined against the sky. He puffed meditatively at his cigar.

I have advised my friend against my own interest. For why? Mrs Keston supports my cause all the better for being drunk. Yet I have given her husband good advice to make her sober. Being sober she is not so subject to my will as when she is drunk. And here I am trying to make her sober. Denise hates me ever since she has known that I love her, and therefore her mother is my only chance. Bah! I am a fool. And yet. I do not know—"



## PART II





## CHAPTER I

### MARY, PITY WOMEN

“DENISE, *mignonne*, if only you realised what my love for you means, I think you would not treat me so harshly.”

“Colonel de Zouchy, I have already told you that it is useless to persecute me like this. You have succeeded in making my life miserable enough as it is. You ask me to love you! I am far more ready to hate you.”

He threw out his arms with a sudden jerk, a mechanical movement which seemed as if he had been struck violently in the breast.

“But there was a time when I was not odious to you. You liked me well enough then.” His voice trembled.

“As a friend, yes. I liked you very much. I never thought of you as anything else.”

"That is no reason why you should hate me as a lover."

"You know well enough why I hate you."

The cold scorn of her voice acted as a tonic. His became harder and more metallic than before.

"Pardon, that is just what I do not quite comprehend."

"Then I will tell you. It is because of the way you use mother to influence me to your wishes."

"Now we are becoming what you call 'candid.' My dear little girl, your mother has been, shall we say, perfectly self-controlled for the last week. That is chiefly my work. You did not know that perhaps."

"Nor do I believe it."

"Ask your father. He will tell you that it is so."

Just then the door opened and Geoffrey Vane-Wenston entered the salon where De Zouchy and Denise were sitting. He limped slightly, for his ankle was still rather

weak. He was colourless, with that clear weakness in the eyes that is a token of convalescence. It was the first time Denise had seen him since the night when Staines and the Germans had carried him down from the Geilenpfad. He had sustained somewhat severe injuries to his head when he had fallen against the great boulder on the Klampenhorn. All the past week he had lain in bed attended by a doctor who had been summoned from Brig.

Colmar de Zouchy and Denise rose as he entered.

"How do you do, Denise? I've been looking forward to this for a week," he said, turning his head aside and speaking in a low tone.

"How are you, Geoffrey?"

She introduced the colonel. Staines had not been able to fulfil his promise of introduction, owing to Vane-Wenston's illness.

"But we have met before," the Frenchman said. "Is it not so?"

"Why, yes. In London, Lancaster Gate,

I saw you there once for a few hours, I believe."

"Ah, now I remember. You and Denise are old friends, are you not?"

"Since I wore Eton collars and she had her hair down."

"But I have the advantage of you. I remember the—the—what do you say in English for *voiture d'enfant*?"

"Perambulator, I presume you mean."

"That is it. I remember the perambulator. *La petite* she was—"

Again the door opened. This time it was Mortimer Staines who entered.

"Hallo, Mr Vane-Wenston. I'm pleased to see you downstairs at last. Feeling better, I hope?"

"Yes, I'm a great improvement on yesterday. I shall be able to go outside to-morrow, I expect."

"Glad to hear it. Are you ready, colonel, to come down to Esend with me and see if we can get those films?"

Colonel de Zouchy was indulging in photography. "Yes, we will start now.

*Au revoir*, Denise. *Au revoir*, Mr Vane-Wenston."

The two elder men went off, leaving Denise and Geoffrey alone.

There was a silence, a strained silence. A little quick-ticking Swiss clock beat on the air like steam-hammers. Then she said, "Your letter reached me, Geoffrey."

He shifted in his chair and looked at her a moment, not knowing what to say. "The one I wrote from Lucerne?"

"Yes,"

"Denise, I hope you didn't misconstrue my meaning."

"Is that all you have to say? Do you know the agony I suffered, the agony I am suffering over that letter. It is almost more than I can bear. I think, if you realised it, you would pity me just a little."

"Denise, what do you mean?"

"Did you imagine I could not read between the lines. Did you think I couldn't see your meaning? It was plain enough. So, Geoffrey—it seems you are growing tired of me?"

"I swear I never meant that."

"You swear you never meant that. Pray what did you mean?"

"What I meant—what I hoped you would see—was that at present—for another six years, at least—it is hopeless for us to think of marrying. I felt that it was too much to ask you to wait six years for a penniless poor devil like me."

"This is very sudden. There was a time when you did not think like that at all. How have your eyes been opened all at once?"

"Denise, in the madness of the moment, before I had time to consider, I talked without reckoning on circumstances. Afterwards I had time to reflect, and—"

"Yes, and you thought that, after I had given you all that any woman ever has to give, you had had enough, and so you took what you considered the most convenient way out of the difficulty."

"Denise, I—"

"Your letter was a sort of preliminary step, you heartless liar."

"Well, then, there is no more to be said."

The argument is ended," and he arose slowly and began to move towards the door. He reached it, passed through, and was closing it behind him. It seemed as good a way out of the difficulty as any other.

"Oh, Geoffrey, Geoffrey, come back. Don't go. I never meant what I said. Oh, Geoffrey, can't you see how I love you?"

"Can't you see how *I* love *you*? I spoke the truth when I told you what I intended you to understand by my letter. If you really will wait for me all that time. It seems an eternity, but I would wait an eternity. I was only in a panic, frightened by my prospects when I wrote that letter. I wish now I'd burnt my right hand off before you ever saw it. Denise, will you forgive me?" He took her in his arms. She did not resist. She was crying.

"Geoffrey, do you really mean that?"

"Mean it? Wait for you? I would wait, as I said, an eternity." He kissed her.

There was a silence. At last he said, "Shall we tell your people of our engagement and face it out?"



"No, Geoffrey, not yet. Not until we are in town, at anyrate. I am afraid of Colonel de Zouchy."

"Afraid of the colonel, why? What has he to do with it?"

"He loves me. He is determined to marry me, and papa is on his side. And mother—well, you know something about poor mother."

"Yes, I know."

"Lately she has been getting much worse, and the colonel is beginning to dominate her in some way. She is very weak and easily led in her unhappy state, so that between them—oh, you can't think how miserable they make me."

"In that case I suppose it *would* be better to keep it secret a bit longer—at anyrate until Colonel de Zouchy is off the scene. But tell me about your mother. Poor little Denise, you haven't been suffering from her as well?"

"Mother has been perfectly herself for the last week. But before that she was under the colonel's thumb more even than

now, and he manages to control her enough as it is. When she has been drinking the things she says to me are terrible. You can't imagine how she makes me suffer. And it is all his doing. I hate him! But now I have you back again, I am happy, so happy."

"Not more than I, dear. But I'm glad to hear your mother has been free from the drink for the last week."

"The colonel says it is owing to him. Perhaps that is true. He is not altogether bad, and I think now he realises how unhappy he makes me. And really he does love me. So perhaps he was sorry for mother for my sake."

"He does not love you as I do." There was a world of truth in that remark. For answer she kissed him.

Footsteps were heard in the passage outside. Denise and Geoffrey sprang apart just as the door opened and Professor Keston came in accompanied by his wife,

"How do you do, Geoffrey?" said Mrs Keston and the professor together. "So pleased to see you able to walk about at last."

The young man shook hands with them. "Thanks, I'm feeling fitter now. I'm awfully pleased to see you."

Then Mrs Keston said, "I was miserable to hear of your accident. It quite upset me."

"It quite upset *me*," said Vane-Wenston. They laughed. "Still," said the professor, "it's being repaired now. In a day or so you will be able to go out for a walk, according to Dr Hartmann."

"Wasn't it lucky Mr Staines and those other gentlemen heard you?" Mrs Keston put in. "The colonel says that often nobody crosses the Geilenpfad for weeks. Just think what might have happened to you."

"I should have had a finer mausoleum than most people, anyway. But I see you are dressed to go out. I wish I could come with you."

"Doctor's orders. Doctor's orders, my dear boy," said the professor. "But I look forward to—well, we might say, the day after to-morrow."

"I hope so. Before I leave this place I mean to try my luck on the old Klampenhorn again. I don't like being beaten, and the Klampenhorn is not really a difficult peak."

"What a blessing it is to have a constitution like yours, Geoffrey," remarked the elder lady. "But we must be going, or we shall lose the top of the afternoon. By the way, I've noticed people never say 'the top of the afternoon.' They say the top of the morning. Then why not the top of the afternoon? Denise, will you come too?"

"I'll go now and put my hat on," was the answer, and she ran happily upstairs, singing softly to herself.

"If I am not rude to ask, what are you doing nowadays, Geoffrey?" said the professor. "If I remember right, the last time I saw you, you had only recently come down from Oxford."

"I'm treading the thorny path of journalism. But I ought not to complain. I may say I am doing fairly well. And I can always get short stories and articles

accepted. I'm doing this holiday on cash I saved somehow."

"That is good. Well, you must come and see us sometimes when we are in town. It was a fortunate thing—coincidence, I may say—that your accident took place so near Marlenberg and us."

While he was talking, Denise came into the room. She was charming, her eyes were bright and her face radiant.

"Now, Geoffrey, good afternoon," the professor said as he rose to go out. "We shall see you again doubtless at dinner." Professor Keston and his family sallied forth, conversing cheerily on their way. The gloom of the previous week was all dispelled now. Mrs Keston was loquacious. The professor calmly approved of everything. Denise was instinct with vivacity and life. For her, too, the shadows had fled, and all the valley, mountains, fields and forests were glorified with a golden romance.

It is a truism that a woman is blindly credulous of all that it is desirable to believe about the man she loves.

## CHAPTER II

### RETROSPECTIVE

GEOFFREY stood at the window and watched the Kestons out of sight. Then he lit a cigarette and went out of the salon across the passage to the smoking-room. No one was there. The Kestons, Mortimer Staines, Colmar de Zouchy and he were now the only guests at the hotel. The French family were gone; Hofner and Kranz were gone, and as yet no one had come in their place.

Vane-Wenston was ill at ease. He sat down painfully in an armchair and began to think out the situation. It was not a pleasant one. Even to himself he could not avoid appearing in a rather odious light.

As he sat there consuming cigarettes and meditatively flicking off the elongated

ashes from the ends, he reviewed the past.

Geoffrey Vane-Wenston and Denise first came to know each other when he was fifteen and she thirteen. He only saw her at intervals when he was staying with his school friend Charles Keston, her brother.

Charles Keston died, as Geoffrey had told Mortimer Staines, from an attack of appendicitis, rapidly, painfully, within the space of eight days, and for a time Geoffrey's visits to the Kestons ceased. But afterwards they were renewed at Mrs Keston's invitation, for she had taken a fancy to her son's greatest friend.

Thus it came about that Geoffrey passed more time than formerly in the society of Denise. The result was almost inevitable. They were both young, one was beautiful and accomplished, the other clever and passably good-looking. Gradually Geoffrey fell in love with the girl, and found when he declared himself that she was equally fond of him. Equally, he thought, events

proved that his love was as the flickering of a taper beside the sweeping gleam of a searchlight.

They became engaged secretly, for it would have been useless to publish the engagement. Her parents would have raised the old, sound, unanswerable objection that although he was at Oxford, although he had literary and journalistic prospects of making enough money to keep himself, yet it would be some long time before he would make enough to keep a wife.

All this was perfectly commonplace, perfectly in order, perfectly in keeping with real life, and with the life portrayed in fiction also. Only Geoffrey Vane-Wenston was not a hero.

For a year affairs remained the same. Then came the day of the triumph of passion over the frailty of human nature.

The Kestons were spending the summer holiday at Sea View in the Isle of Wight. Geoffrey was there also, staying with them. \*



During a year the cumulative power of an irresistible passion had gathered—if it were possible—more force from the realisation of its limitations. And, in the soft caressing air of the island, passion at last burst its bonds, threw aside the last vestiges of restraint, and culminated in one mad week of love realised and satisfied.

It were arrogant to blame Denise. "He that is without sin among you let him first cast a stone at her." Let the blame rest rather on her lover. In the immortal language of De Quincey: "So far as she had offended at all, her case was that of millions in every generation—the wrongs done by her dishonourable lover" were done "under favour of opportunities created by her confidence in his integrity." The memory of Sea View was branded on the minds of both by a flame of mingled terror, repentance and delight.

At the end of that summer holiday, Geoffrey, who had left Oxford in June of the same year, went abroad to Germany to study the language and to pick up

continental experience. He wrote continually to Denise, and his letters seemed to her like fragments of inspired poetry. So the time passed, marked at first only by mutual correspondence, marked later for Denise by racking apprehension. Then, as the weeks wore on and the danger gradually diminished in the past, the apprehension gave place to a subtle and scarcely perceptible feeling of wrong, suffered and endured at the masterful desires of another, and all the while Geoffrey was gradually realising dimly what he had done, possession was mentally proving nine points of *ennui*, and the flame of his love began to flicker and sink down into the ashes of the past.

It was in June that he first realised fully that he did not love Denise as before.

For a time he contrived to maintain the old passion in his letters. But he wrote less frequently. At first he had no second thoughts about marrying her. *That* he considered as his inevitable duty which

he might not avoid. Besides, there were still lingering moments of exaltation, the effect of some piece of magnificent music, or of a glorious sunset, when he could still tuck his consciousness and call up the old flavour of his passion. He drugged his brain with thoughts. But these moments became more and more infrequent.

His character was not fine; it was one which, as they make larger acquaintance with men and things, are apt to become deteriorated. Little by little moral sense lapsed in Geoffrey Vane-Wenston.

Then it began to dawn on his mind that marriage with Denise would be positively repugnant to him. He had nothing to gain by marrying her, since her parents would assuredly oppose the marriage; nor could she, in any case, bring him a fortune worth having; and he felt sure that if he had to wait several years in order to marry her openly his love would not stand the test of time.

This growing conviction was at first a matter of great mental worry to him in

its naked certainty. He hated himself for it, and wondered what was the reason. He could not himself discover it in the depths of his innate selfishness—those depths which he himself had never really probed.

After no long space of time Geoffrey ceased to revile himself for his treacherous coldness, and began to treat it as a matter of course, an outcome of time, a natural result of a ripened experience, which he himself was unable to avoid or stem.

June and July passed, and he had carefully avoided visits to the house in Lancaster Gate. For a while he found relief and distraction in hard work. In his letters to Denise he still kept up the old appearance, and the fact that the letters were less frequent she attributed to his work, which she imagined was for her sake.

In August the Kestons went on the Continent, and finally made a stay in Switzerland, after two or three weeks of travelling and sight-seeing. Geoffrey also made up his mind to go to Switzerland, and arrived there in the first week of August,

believing that the Kestons were either still in town, or else in Paris, where he thought they intended to spend the whole month.

A letter from Denise, written at Paris, and forwarded to him from London, informed him that she herself with her father and mother would be spending some time in the Alps. His answer was the letter from the Schweizerhof, which was the ultimate concrete outcome of his long and uneasy meditations. He believed that it was the preliminary step towards the end, that it was the simplest way to break softly out of his difficulty. Denise had read aright between the lines.

His style of letter-writing had always been passionate to Denise, polished to others. He was an artist, and dealt fittingly with words. This letter was neither polished nor passionate. He deliberately wrote it in a somewhat loose and unconsidered style, in order that it might seem more plausible and more spontaneous.

The effect on Denise has already been

observed. The adventures of Geoffrey Vane-Wenston since the date of the letter have already been recorded. Coincidence alone brought it about that he came to Marlenberg. When the accident befel him on the Klampenhorn he was, as he said, on his way to the Hotel Helsenhorn.

He managed to conceal his feelings very successfully when Mortimer Staines told him that the Kestons were at the hotel.

His injuries and the illness resultant therefrom gave him a respite of seven days.

In the interview with Denise he had intended to stand resolutely by his letter, if need were, but he was weak. Her anger, beauty and distress were more than a match for his will. In an access of sudden impulse, of weakness, half pity and half fear, he yielded and deliberately deceived her.

And now, as he sat in the smoking-room, he cursed himself and racked his mind for ways and means of solving the situation. Of course, solving the situation meant a solution which should result in his own

release without any too painful scenes with Denise. That was the necessary thing. Why were women so persistent, so serious in love?

Why should he not remove himself as soon as possible and never see the girl again? It seemed simple, convenient and expedient. He would do that. But what if she were goaded by his desertion into making a clean breast of everything to her parents, then he would be compelled to marry her. No, desertion was not so easy as it appeared.

One good idea (it seemed so to him) had entered his mind during the scene with Denise. He had even mentioned it to her. It was one of those kaleidoscopic ideas which have more than one aspect. It was that they should announce the engagement. He reckoned on the Professor and Mrs Keston to do the rest. But it was possible that they would not do it so effectually as he wished. Then he remembered that he had a rival, a most opportune rival. Colonel de Zouchy must be worked to the best advantage.

At this juncture a fiendish thought, born of something Denise had said that afternoon, entered into his mind. It shaped itself somewhat as follows, not very vividly at first, vaguely because the brain shrinks from the poison of evil at its first appearance, but afterwards in more detail and with greater vividness and force. When Mrs Keston was intoxicated she worried her daughter to marry the colonel. Comparatively she hardly worried Denise at all when she had not been drinking. The colonel himself had ceased to take advantage of this—had even cut himself off from any possibility of taking such advantage. What if he, Geoffrey Vane-Wenston, made it possible again for the Frenchman to reap the benefits of Mrs Keston's vice? Colmar de Zouchy would soon yield to the temptation. Then if the cards in the game were properly played the result must almost certainly follow that Denise would be forced into marriage with the Frenchman. The latter would assuredly take care that Mrs Keston should be redeemed when once he had attained his



object. The situation would be solved and no permanent harm (so it seemed to the young man) would be done to anyone.

At first his mind revolted from such a scheme. Then his thoughts hovered over the idea, winged gradually round it like some unclean insect round the deadly flame of a lamp, and at last he began to believe that there was a possibility of serious consideration in it. He was torn by temptation, doubt and revolt amounting almost to agony.

## CHAPTER III

LO! MINE EYE HATH SEEN ALL THIS

THE following morning, Denise, Staines and Colmar de Zouchy were standing together on the verandah deliberating on what they should do that day.

The weather had changed. It was still warm, but giant volumes of cloud rolled along the mountains and blotted out the upper slopes. Occasionally a shafted ray of sunlight flashed through a rift and made glad a part of the Marlenthal. The pine forests hung dark beneath the shadowing vapours which swept the topmost trees. It was one of those days when a walk below in valleys is delightful, and climbing on the heights above undesirable and perhaps impossible.

“We can't very well make a day of it,” Mortimer Staines was saying, “because

there isn't anywhere particular to go, except uphill. A walk in the morning and another in the afternoon. *Voilà tout*, as the colonel says."

"I don't think I shall go out this morning," said Denise, "and I don't know what papa intends to do. Neither he nor mother are down yet, lazy creatures."

"Is the light good enough for any photography, colonel?" asked Staines. "If so, you and I might go out and try our hand at some cloud effects. At anyrate the light may improve, and we shall probably be able to find something worth snapping."

"But yes, we might do that. Yes, certainly we will do that. I will go at once and get the camera," and the colonel went off to fetch his new toy.

"You won't come, then?" Staines said to Denise.

"I think not this morning."

"By the way, I know you've got a pair of field-glasses. Will you lend them to me? I'll take the greatest care of them. I often feel the want of glasses when I am among

the mountains. I have been intending for a long time to get a pair, but somehow I've always put it off."

"Oh, yes, with pleasure. I'll get them at once." She went into the hotel.

For a few minutes Mortimer Staines was left alone on the verandah. Suddenly he noticed Denise's handkerchief lying on the boards in a corner where she had dropped it. Then Staines did a curious thing. He, a confirmed bachelor, a man of the world whose fourth decade time was hastening to close, picked up the handkerchief impulsively and kissed it. Then he looked round. No one had seen him. "I'm a damned fool," he said to himself. "It's quite hopeless, and she's in love already. Who could have thought that one week would do this for me, I—" His soliloquy was interrupted by Colonel de Zouchy, who came out with the camera—a black, leather-bound hand camera for a quarter-plate.

"I shall use this to-day," he said, "instead of the Kodak. It is quite a long time since I tried it. Shall we start?"

“Wait a minute. Miss Keston has gone to get me her field-glasses.”

Denise came out carrying a leathern case, with a shoulder strap. “Here are the glasses, Mr Staines,” she said.

They were a pair of compact aluminium-framed field-glasses with powerful lenses. Staines thanked her and slung them over his shoulder. He said nothing about the handkerchief, which he had folded up and placed in his pocket. It was a harmless theft.

“Oh, Mr Staines, will you be kind and get me some stamps from the post-office if you pass it?” she said, producing a franc. “Thank you so much. There, I want four stamps—twenty-five centimes each.”

“Only too pleased,” said Staines. “Anything else I can do for you?”

“Nothing at present, thank you.”

Staines and the colonel set forth. They went through the village towards the post-office, which was a small shop in a rough-looking chalet.

The village was bisected by a stony path.

On each side of it the timber-built houses were dotted about in picturesque disorder.

The post-office had its entrance on the central path. The shop was a sort of general store, containing a few groceries, some tobacco, and an assortment of walking sticks. Staines and the Frenchman entered. The former asked for the stamps which he had promised to buy for Denise. The man who served him was a striking specimen of Swiss humanity. He was short and enormously deep-chested; he had a dark brown wrinkled face, with deep-set shiftily green eyes, a slightly hooked nose, and a thick stubby growth of greyish hair on his chin. His head was nearly bald except for a few scattered grey hairs. His mouth was thick and sensual, and his entire expression was one of vicious malevolence. He spoke in a soft smooth voice which contrasted strangely with his appearance.

“What an awful creature,” Staines remarked when they were outside the shop.

“Is he not? He is named Jakob Scherz, and he owns that shop. I have heard of

him from Elias Waldener. His reputation in the village is very bad."

"In what way?"

"Oh, in the usual way. They say that his wife left him because of his devilish cruelty to her and to the children. It has happened once that a man of the village—Joseph Klotz—was found dead. It was in the spring, and the man was said to have been killed by an avalanche. But it was known that Scherz had a grudge against Klotz, and many suspected him at the time. But nothing ever came of the affair."

"I see. The usual story."

"Precisely. The journals are full of such stories. One has only to read the *dossiers* at a police court in France. But where shall we go now?"

"Well, let me see. There is that path up by the church. I've been along it once before. It divides just at that corner there beyond the church. You see? One branch skirts along and through those woods. The other, I believe, leads round in the direction of those two small valleys, the Heilthal and the Sollenthal."

“What think you then of exploring that other branch there. I have never followed it myself, and perhaps the Heilthal may show us something fine.”

“Very well, we’ll do it.”

The two men turned off across the Marl and moved up the path. They passed the church with its plaster-covered walls. Under a sort of shed, and surmounted by a wooden crucifix, they noticed a heap of human bones of all kinds piled up against the wall of the building.

“What’s the idea of making a little open-air charnel house like that?” asked Staines.

“Because, you see, they have not room in the cemetery for more than three generations of dead. The soil is so thin. So they dig up the old graves; and that is the way they make amends to the disturbed. It is simple. Ah, here we are where the path divides itself in two. *Allons*, to the right now.”

Mortimer Staines, looking along to the leftward, remembered that on that path one week ago he had first seen Denise. Could he have anticipated then that before eight



days were past he should be passionately in love with the girl? It was so hopeless this love of his. Why had he steered clear till now, only to fall a victim at last? A long-forgotten chorus of the master of Greek tragedy came back to his mind and answered him this question. "Invincible Aphrodite makes sport of men." There beside him was one rival. Behind at the hotel was another, whose life he himself had been instrumental in saving. Had the Frenchman any suspicion that Denise was in love with Vane-Wenston? Staines could not tell whether he had or had not. It might be that the former had noticed something in her decision not to go out that morning. Staines envied Geoffrey.

The path was narrow and the two walked in file, the Frenchman in front. While Staines was mournfully meditating on his own view of the situation, Colmar de Zouchy was thinking also. He was beginning to suspect that Denise loved someone else. He had seen and marked the way Denise looked at Geoffrey from

time to time. He attached no importance to her refusal to come out for the morning. That might of itself show nothing; but he had seen her look at Geoffrey. "*C'est assez.* It is enough," he said to himself. "Eh bien, nous verrons ce que nous verrons, mon bel ami." And then again he began to be doubtful. After all he might be wrong. Imagination might have misled him. But it would not be long before he found out for certain. His thoughts were uneasy, inquiring, and there was no certainty in them.

"What do you think of that young man, Vane-Wenston?" asked the colonel.

"Not very much." I have met him before at the Schweizerhof in Lucerne. It was last August. Somehow or other I was not favourably impressed by him. He seemed to be a superficially smart modern youth of a kind I don't care for."

"I have not seen so much of him as you have. But I also have met him once formerly. It was at Professor Keston's, in London."

"Look there." Staines pointed up to

the end of the Heilthal. "Do you see that torrent pouring over those steep terraces? It makes a very fine effect with a curtain of clouds above and the fringe of forlorn trees lower down. Could we photograph that?"

"Let us try," answered the other. "But I think that it is necessary to go nearer before we begin."

"All right."

"The light not being of the best, a somewhat longer exposure was required than on a sunlit day, but they believed that they had secured a fairly good negative. They looked about for more quarry for the camera.

"I have an idea," said the colonel. "What say you to a little competition? I will bet you five francs that I will take five better negatives than you. Each of us will make five consecutive exposures."

"Done with you. Who starts first?"

"Shall we toss up?"

De Zouchy won the toss, and the competition commenced. Within an hour and a quarter he had secured his five negatives, assisted by an opportune gleam of sunshine

which opened up new vistas of beauty. Then he handed over the apparatus to Staines.

“Do you mind carrying the glasses?” said the latter, taking the camera and a leathern receptacle for extra plates which they had brought with them. “Then I can sling this other thing over my shoulder by the strap.”

“Certainly, my dear fellow, whatever you wish.”

The sunshine continued and gradually conquered the clouds. A light wind had arisen and the mists began to shift. At intervals a peak was seen, apparently at a gigantic height, set in clouds above the mist-wrapped base.

It is curious to note how the apparent height of a mountain is increased when only the summit is seen framed in the clouds which conceal all but the lower slopes.

Mortimer Staines secured four negatives in slightly less time than his opponent had needed for five.

The fifth and last he said he would reserve

until they reached the church on their way back, as he intended to obtain a photograph of the bones which were piled up against the wall.

It was already time to return in order not to be late for *déjeuner*, so they began to retrace their steps.

“What sort of glasses are these?” asked the colonel, opening the case and taking them out.

“Very good ones. I have tested them at long distances and found that they show up objects remarkably clearly.

“Do you see that field on the other side of the valley? I think that I can just see something there moving.” As he spoke De Zouchy directed the glasses towards the field in question.

“It is a goat,” he said. “Yes, certainly, they are very good glasses.”

They reached the Church of Marlenberg.

“Here we are,” said Staines, opening the gate of the little cemetery. “I’ll go in and get a photo of the bones. And I don’t mind boasting that my set of negatives beats

yours. Those five francs are as good as lost," and he laughed.

"On the contrary," said the colonel, smiling. "What about my superb cloud effect, eh, *mon cher*?"

Staines entered the churchyard and round to the place where the bones were piled up. The skulls seemed to him as if they were grinning ironically at his folly, seemed to know of the new tumult and disturbance of his brain.

"I wonder," he thought for a moment, "how many of these good people have been in the same case as myself. What a fool I am." Then he concentrated his mind on the correct focus of the camera.

Outside on the path the colonel stood and carelessly glanced about in various directions through the glasses. Then he looked down across the village at the hotel. Two people were sitting on the verandah. A moment later Colmar de Zouchy put the field-glasses back in the case and buckled the strap viciously. His eyes gleamed, and his teeth showed white through lips that were parted in a grim and angry smile.

## CHAPTER IV

### CURTAIN ON ACT THE SECOND

“Good morning, my lord.”

“Hullo, Denise, where have you been all this morning? Why, it’s twenty minutes to one.”

“Acting as papa’s secretary, talking to mother, and writing two letters, that’s what I have been doing. Oh, I have been quite hard at work. And what, may I ask, are you doing there?”

“I am working at a short article, and at intervals beaming blankly round on the world as represented by the Marlenthal.”

“How do you feel this morning?”

“I flourish. Let me see, to-day is Thursday. To-morrow I shall be able to go for a walk. And on Saturday I ought to begin to leap and run. My ankle was

not so very badly hurt. It was my head that fixed me up."

"Are you really determined to attempt the Klampenhorn again?" she asked, sitting down in a chair beside him on the verandah.

"Absolutely."

"Then I think your determination is just obstinacy."

"My dear Denise, determination is one's own quality, obstinacy that of other people. I consider that the mountain has offered me a personal insult, and in return I shall assert myself by standing on his highness's head."

"I'm coming with you, then."

"Then the Klampenhorn is bound to yield. Oh, confound it," he broke off.

"Whatever is the matter?"

"A little beast of a fly or gnat or something has just committed suicide in my right eye. See if you can haul it out, will you?"

"Lend me your handkerchief, then."

Geoffrey produced it, an ordinary linen one.

"Oh, that's much too coarse for a delicate operation like this. I must use mine. Why, direction of the verandah, made a half salute,



where can it have gone to? I had it this morning, I know, because — I wonder where it is — I suppose I must have dropped it somewhere. Never mind, I'll try and make yours do."

She bent over him and succeeded in gently humouring the dead midget out of his eye. In doing so her face was very near to his, and neither of them could resist the kiss that followed.

"There, I can see all right now with it," said Geoffrey. "What a paralysing sensation it is when something suddenly gets into your eye. I can see two people up by the church path. They look like Mr Staines and Colonel de Zouchy. But the distance makes them fairly indistinct."

"I wonder if Mr Staines has remembered to get me my stamps," said Denise.

"Enter the villain on the left," remarked Geoffrey. "Look there, mark where he comes."

Jakob Scherz, the Marlenberg postmaster, was passing the hotel. He leered malevolently with his shifty green eyes in the

muttered a surly greeting in German, and went on towards the village.

"There's an inspiring sight for you," Geoffrey said.

"What a monster," she answered. "I wonder who he is."

"The village villain, obviously."

"I shouldn't like to meet him on a dark night," she said.

"But doubtless it's another case of a heart of gold beating beneath a rough exterior. A more harmless, worthy man in all probability never stepped."

"He may be the village half-wit."

"I doubt it," he answered. "He doesn't look half-witted. *Apropos* of half-wits, has it ever struck you that nearly every community of human beings—village, school, or work-house—has a 'loony' among its members. It's a curious thing that. In almost all the Swiss villages that I've seen there is to be found a slobbering, half-formed creature aimlessly idling away the time. It's as if Providence provided the community with a jester free of charge."

"That's not a nice way of talking. Let's change the subject. You haven't told me if I look pretty this morning."

"Mais, ça va sans dire."

"But I like to hear you say it."

"Well, you look perfectly delightful."

"What does that mean?"

"Capable of causing delight in others—men especially."

"Thank you, sir."

"Really you ought not to blame the colonel for being in love with you. I don't see how he could help it."

"But he ought to help it."

"'Love that pardons no lover for loving.' Observe wherein I misquote Dante."

"I am afraid I don't know the right quotation."

"'Love that pardons no loved one for loving.' And to himself he could not avoid thinking, 'The misquotation applies to her, the right quotation not at all to me.'"

There was silence for a moment, then, "Here come the photographers," she said, as Staines and the colonel emerged from

among the châteaux of Marlenberg and came up the path toward the hotel. When they arrived at the wooden steps she said, "How did you get on?"

"We've taken ten pictures," Staines answered. "At least I hope they're pictures. The colonel took five and I took five. We have a bet as to which of us has got the best. You shall be judge."

"Here are your glasses, Denise," said De Zouchy. "Mr Staines carried the camera and the plates, so he made me take these for the last part of our promenade. They are very good glasses."

"I have to thank you very much for the use of them, Miss Keston," said Staines, who knew nothing of what the colonel had seen from the path by the church. "But De Zouchy used them more than I did this morning, I'm afraid."

"Good morning, colonel," put in Geoffrey. "Do you know I could see you right up there by the church. Could you see us?"

The colonel slowly twisted his moustachio with his left hand. "Yes, I saw you," he

said, and to himself he repeated, "Yes, I saw you, *mon enfant*."

The lunch bell rang and they all went in. In the dining-room the Professor and Mrs Keston joined them. Staines had the good fortune to sit next to Denise, on the other side of whom was her father. Her mother, Geoffrey and Colmar de Zouchy sat opposite on the other side of the table.

"Oh, I nearly forgot, forgive me, here are your stamps, Miss Keston," Staines said, taking out his pocket-book. He had purchased the stamps with another franc than the one which Denise had given him. That he was carefully preserving. To him there was a sacredness about anything, even a franc piece, which had passed through her hands. How delightful it was only to sit next to her, to watch the motions of her small white hands. In her presence he felt that existence was in itself an act of adoration.

De Zouchy sat next to Geoffrey Vane-Wenston, whom he now knew for his rival, and worse, for his successful rival. His

feelings were not charitable just then. He almost wished that he had not done what he had done to redeem Mrs Keston. But he put the thought aside as unworthy of an officer of France.

“Bah,!” he said to himself, “I am an officer and a gentleman, and for a time I was forgetful of it.”

Colmar de Zouchy therefore found that he must seek other means to crush his rival, for it never entered into his mind to do anything else but crush him. He was not a man for whom submission was attractive, or who was wont to endure opposition, or thwarting of his desire. His was a positive imperious nature, backed by an iron will, and no small store of intellectual and practical resource. As he sat there eating, wrath gave way to cool determination and he began to think out the position of affairs, and to prepare to take advantage of any and every opportunity that fortune might throw in his way.

“Have you seen a remarkably villainous-looking man about in Marlenberg, Mr Staines?” asked Geoffrey. “I suppose that

he's a native of the place. A malicious aspect and a pair of green eyes are his chief claims to recognition. I noticed him this morning as he was passing by."

"You must mean Scherz the postmaster," Staines answered. "I myself had never seen him until this morning, when I went in to buy some stamps for Miss Keston. You see one generally puts one's letters in the hall box here. It was he who sold them to me. The colonel told me about him."

"Yes," the latter remarked, "it is the most notorious character of the village. They say he is as bad as he looks."

"Then he must be bad indeed," said Denise.

"A living encyclopædia of crime," said Geoffrey.

"Who is this to whom you refer?" the professor asked.

"The village postmaster, villain, and general Jack-the-Ripper," replied Geoffrey. "Have you ever seen him, professor?"

"No, not that I can remember."

"I saw him once," said Mrs Keston. "I

went in, like Mr Staines, to buy stamps. Ugh! he looked a positive monster."

*Déjeuner* came to an end. Mrs Keston went into the salon, and amused herself by reading an English novel which she found there. Geoffrey made his way to the smoking-room. After saying something to her father, Denise went upstairs. The professor retired to his books. The colonel set about developing his plates, and Staines accompanied him.

By arrangement with Elias Waldener they had secured a small upper apartment for use as a dark room, where they had installed the varied apparatus necessary for photography.

In the dark room that afternoon there was a catastrophe. Staines, in moving across from one side to the other, unwittingly knocked down the Kodak from a shelf on to the floor. On picking it up he found that the lens was cracked.

"I'm awfully sorry," he said. "Look here, I'll tell you what I will do. I'll go at once to that thrice blessed shop in Esend where we bought the films and see what they can



do in the way of replacing it. I can get back easily before the late evening, and I don't in the least mind the walk."

"Not at all, my dear fellow, don't do anything of the sort. It is not worth the trouble."

"I must insist," said Staines. "I should like the exercise, and, besides, you know that you may want to use the Kodak to-morrow."

The real truth was that he had heard Denise tell her father, before she went upstairs after lunch, that she intended to go down to Esend that afternoon and buy sketching materials. The breaking of the Kodak was a lucky accident for him.

The colonel was persuaded, and Staines made no delay in setting out. He looked eagerly along the path as far as the corner, but she was nowhere in sight. He hurried on and reached the turning-point where the path led down the ravine to Esend. Some hundreds of yards in front Denise was walking rapidly. Staines increased his pace and began to overtake her ; as he approached, he made his pace slower so as not to appear

breathless with the effort of catching her up. Hearing footsteps behind her, she turned round, recognised him, and waited until he reached her side.

“Good afternoon,” he said. “Are you bound for Esend? So am I; having just broken the colonel’s Kodak, I’m going to see what can be done to mend it. Here it is; you see the lens is broken.”

“I’m going to buy sketching materials. And really I’m very glad you are with me, for it never occurred to me that it will probably be quite dark long before we get anything like home—if an hotel can be called ‘home.’”

“These paths are rather nasty at night.”

“Yes, I wonder papa let me go. But he was travelling in spirit towards ancient Carthage when I told him. Though as a rule he’s by no means an orthodox absent-minded professor.”

“You really shouldn’t have set out by yourself, though,” Staines said, feeling heartily glad at the same time that she was alone.

“Well, I asked mother to come with me,

but she complained of not feeling very well, and gave me permission to go alone. She also must have forgotten that the sun sets earlier than he did, even only one week ago."

"But at anyrate if we meet anybody like Mr Scherz the postmaster, for instance, you have me to protect you," Staines said, laughing.

Denise smiled in response.

"Yes, and indeed it is a most dramatic scene just here, for the heroic repulse of a brigand—rolling clouds above and a roaring torrent below. And talking of rolling clouds, I do hope it won't rain."

"I don't think it will," he replied. "Somehow or another it doesn't feel like it."

Denise felt far more happy and contented now that Geoffrey was with her, now that the memory of his letter was effaced. She felt more kindly disposed to everyone, and her liking for Staines increased as they walked together. Her mood was expansive and intimate.

Staines himself felt this as he strode along, but he knew the reason, and the knowledge was bitter. It permeated his consciousness

and tinged his chivalrous delight in her company with melancholy.

But neither of them, as they stood admiring a plunging cloud-crowned cataract, nor even the colonel as he developed his plates by the light of the red lamp in the dark room at the hotel, had penetrated the miserable mind of Geoffrey Vane-Wenston.

"It was last Tuesday week," said Denise, "when we climbed the Engenhorn, and now—" she paused.

"Now?" said Staines.

"Now I am happier than I was then." She was silent. Staines made no reply. He understood.

They walked on, increasing their speed, for they still had some distance to go before they reached Esend. At intervals a wild longing swept over Staines to throw reserve to the winds and speak what he felt. Then succeeded a dead calm of hopelessness; and all the while he talked lightly and humorously to the girl beside him.

It was a quarter to five when they arrived at the little town in the Rhone Valley.

“We must hurry because we shall need every bit of three hours to walk back; you see, it will be all uphill.”

“We shall miss dinner then,” she answered. “Never mind, we will refresh ourselves here and have supper at the Helsenhorn when we return. I hope they won’t be anxious about us.”

They found the place where the Kodak films had been purchased. It was a small chemist’s shop, and, considering the size of Esend, was exceedingly well stocked. The proprietor was an urbane chubby little Swiss, who had spent a part of his life in England, and was proud of that fact. He drove a thriving traffic in photographic apparatus among the tourists, of whom a great many passed through the place, which was on the main Rhone Valley road.

“So the gentleman had broken his lens; he would see what could be done. Yes, he had an extra detached one, the very thing, just the smallest bit in the world too large. But no, there, with a little pushing it fitted. Was there anything else the gentleman

wanted? Perhaps madame would like to buy something. No? He had a special store of photographic apparatus. It was a new venture, this, of his, and the foreign gentlemen and ladies always came there for what they required. Esend and its environs were the very places for the camera. Did madame indulge in photography also? No? Ah, well, perhaps another day." And the talkative little man bowed them out.

"What a funny little creature!" Denise said, laughing, when they had left the shop. "He took us for a young married couple on the honeymoon."

"Evidently," Staines replied slowly. A chill fell over him as he spoke.

Denise bought her sketching materials at another shop, a semi-stationery establishment, containing a variety of goods such as alpenstocks, wooden carved work, and souvenirs of the locality. Then the two of them refreshed themselves at the Hotel des Alpes with biscuits and lemonade, and, after a short rest, began the return journey.

The afternoon had been to Staines a

curious mixture of enjoyment and misery. He had never experienced anything quite like it before. His dominant thought, one which swayed and tore him, was that it was now nearly the middle of September, and with the end of the month it seemed that all must finish, and Denise would pass out of his life. So his thoughts ran on as he ascended the Marl ravine.

She meanwhile was wondering how Geoffrey was passing the afternoon without her. She reproached herself for having left him, even for so short a time; and yet there was delightful self-torment in being away from him just a little, in order to enjoy more keenly the pleasure of seeing him again. She looked forward to the morrow and the coming happiness of expeditions in common. It was dark when they reached the place where the path curved. In front of them, when they had rounded the corner, they could see the lights of the hotel to the left, and of the village to the right.

They were not far from the hotel when they passed two men who were standing at the side of the path talking. The darkness

was not deep enough to prevent Staines and Denise from recognising them. One was Jakob Scherz, the other Geoffrey Vane-Wenston. The latter recognised them as they stopped on seeing him. He said good-night to Scherz, who walked off to the village, and before Denise could speak, "Hallo, you two, where have you been?"

"Making purchases at Esend, dear," said she, forgetting for the moment the presence of Staines, who, hearing her, left them together there, and went on in front.

She began to talk eagerly to Geoffrey.

"I do hope you didn't find it dull while I was away, but I'd not have gone if I had thought it would take such a long time. It was lucky that Mr Staines was with me—he had to get a new lens for the colonel's camera which he had broken. But why are you conspiring with the village villain, and however comes it that you are walking about to-day?"

"Oh, well, you see, it's all foolery about my foot. If I can walk about the hotel, I can just as well potter about the village. So I went out for a smoke after dinner, and I



happened to get into conversation with Mr Scherz, who is by no means a bad conversationalist, and can make himself understood in English, though he can't speak it one quarter so well as our landlord."

"After to-day, you dear old boy, we shall be able to go out together as in the old time."

They entered the hotel. Denise went into the dining-room and found Staines at supper. Her father and mother had been under no anxiety about her, since they had realised that she could not possibly return before dark; and when De Zouchy had told them that Staines had also gone down to Esend and would probably meet her, they had been all the more assured of her safety. Mortimer Staines was a great favourite at the Hotel Helsenhorn.

The colonel was profusely thankful for the mending of his Kodak.

For the rest, with the colonel and Staines in the smoking-room, the professor reading while Mrs Keston dosed over a book at one end of the salon, and with Denise and Geoffrey *à deux* at the other end, the evening passed away happily enough.

## PART III



## CHAPTER I

### TEMPTATION

ON Friday evening Mrs Keston was alone in her bedroom, changing her dress. There was a skirt which she had decided to wear lying folded on the bed. She took it up and shook it as a preliminary to putting it on.

She shook the skirt in the orthodox manner, holding it at the waist, raising and then dropping her hands sharply so as to cause the skirt to fold back on itself and unfold with a snap. At the third shake something hard struck obliquely against her hand.

She paused and examined the skirt. In the pocket she found a flask. She drew it out with a start of surprise, held it up to the light of the candle, unscrewed the stopper, smelt the contents. And then a wave of hot surging impulse swept over her. The scent of the brandy brought back with it all the old

terrible fascination and well-nigh untamable longing from which for one week there had been respite.

Mrs Keston was not particularly surprised at finding the flask. She imagined that it was one of her own which had lain hitherto unnoticed and neglected in the pocket of her skirt. She had not dared to take any open notice of the disappearance of her various devices for obtaining brandy. At first, for three days, she had suffered torment almost unendurable, a burning craving torment which had only yielded temporarily to the glorious atmosphere of the Alps and the natural fatigue of healthy exercise. And since such an active condition of life was, in her case at anyrate, hygienically abnormal, the desire for drink, insuperable under other and more ordinary circumstances, had been conquered for a time. Indeed she had had the good sense, precisely as the colonel had prophesied, to see the wisdom, even while she secretly revolted against the ignominy, of the removal of her flasks, parasol and other apparatus, although she

suspected, nay, was certain that she knew who was responsible for their disappearance. After the scene in the Sollenthal, the good in Mrs Keston had reasserted itself. The drink habit with her did not progress in a steady regular course. It advanced by leaps and bounds with intervening pauses of reaction and bitter repentance. Lately these pauses, these stations on the road, had become less frequent. But when the Sollenthal incident had closed, her better nature had triumphed, aided by the care of her husband and of the colonel, without which it must inevitably have failed.

She had suffered, but the suffering had passed. Almost certainly the craving would have grown upon her again, but she would have been better able to meet it after a long period of abstinence. Now, the time of abstinence had been so short, and here, alone and unaided, she was once more assailed by the fearful temptation.

Should she drink or should she not? Why hesitate? What harm would one short taste do her?

Yet some unaccountable instinct warned her against the brandy—a strange instinct warring with that other terrible prompting which bade her drink.

For a minute shame made her strong. She would rid herself of this flask, this small insinuating demon thing, endowed almost with a personality in its mute persuasive eloquence and subtle silent strength.

Ah, she was strong! she was strong! Stronger than this little screw-stoppered fiend. She would put it away and look at it no more.

Mrs Keston moved across the room to her trunk and lifted the lid. Everything that was good within her was in loud revolt, and, almost finding a voice, seemed to cry, "Throw it out of the window, destroy it, anything rather than keep it." On the other hand, all the accumulated promptings of a habit of two years said, "Just one drop; you can do what you like with the rest afterwards, but better keep it." And between the two impulses she compromised, and, hastily

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thrusting the flask into the trunk, shut and locked the lid.

And the strife of the fighting impulses continued. She was racked and torn between them. She prayed, but there was no heart in her prayer. She prayed, but while she prayed she knew that she did not feel the meaning of the words she used.

She was dressed completely by this time, but a fatal fascination held her to the room. She could have gone downstairs had she the power to will it, but in the tremendous phrase of the opium eater, "The weight of twenty Atlantics was upon her, or the oppression of inexpressible guilt." She was as it were in a dream.

She walked across the room to the window, opened it, and, leaning out, breathed into her lungs the pure evening air of the mountains. The refreshing coolness relieved her slightly, and she felt stronger. Then suddenly once more she descended into the depths of temptation, and again the horrible struggle of body and soul was renewed. Six times she went to and fro between the window and her



trunk. Twice she opened the lid and twice she shut it with a snap.

Then came the crisis. Once more she went to the trunk, and this time she took out the flask, held it up, looked at it, unscrewed the top and put it to her lips. The struggle had shattered her nerves, and her hand shook so, that in raising the bottle she spilt some of the brandy on herself. She began to drink ; but a convulsion of coughing seized her, and the liquor went no further than her mouth. The fingers of the hand that held the flask and the flask itself were covered with moisture ; the glass, slippery as a damp window pane, slid through her shaking fingers and fell to the ground, spilling the remainder of the brandy. She was saved, for this once she was saved.

Tottering, she sank down upon a chair and wept for sheer relief. The struggle had left its impress on her appearance ; once more she looked haggard and faded as a week ago. But what matter ? At the eleventh hour, in spite of herself, she had been saved. It seemed like the intervention of God. She

knelt down and prayed, prayed with meaning in her words, with the gratitude of adoration.

There was the pathos of all human nature in the woman who knelt there in the flickering candlelight, which cast shifting shadows on the walls and made the darkness outside seem darker. The terror of the crisis which was past seemed to be symbolised in the dimness of the shadows.

After a while she arose and picked up the flask, which was unbroken. She hesitated as to how she would dispose of it. All its persuasive personality had left it now, it was no longer a demon, it was but the coreless husk of a temptation, the abject reminder of what might have been. Still she must be rid of it. After a few seconds' hesitation she thrust it behind the chest of drawers. The flask being flat-sided and elliptic easily lay between the woodwork of the chest and the wall of the room. It would not be discovered, she thought, until long after she had left Marlenberg.

The stains of the brandy remained on the floor. Still she could not erase them, and it

was improbable that they would be very noticeable the following morning.

The room smelt of the liquor, but the window was open, and if the door were also left wide the cool night breeze would sweeten the atmosphere of the room.

Then Mrs Keston extinguished the candle and went downstairs.

## CHAPTER II

### THE SCHIMSENHORN

"It's time to get up, Mr Staines. It is now a quarter to five. We start in half an hour," called Professor Keston, knocking at the door of Staines's room.

"All right, professor," he answered, and jumped out of bed.

The sun had not yet risen, but the darkness of night was giving place to that morn-twilight, which is so reminiscent, when one first sees it, of the red alpengluh of the night before, and the stars glimmered more and more faintly in the gradually brightening sky.

It was Saturday morning. The professor had been persuaded by Staines and the colonel to ascend the Schimsenhorn, a peak which rose to the north-east of the Marlenthal.

Besides the professor and his wife and

daughter, Geoffrey was to make one of the party, having now recovered, for, as he had told Denise, his ankle had not been really seriously sprained, while his head had been completely healed by the treatment of Dr Hartmann, assisted by the atmosphere of the Alps and a strong constitution.

Elias Waldener was to act as guide, and that worthy Switzer was in his element. The fees that he received for his services compensated in a small degree for the non-arrival of visitors. It usually happened in Marlenberg that tourists ceased to bring grist to the hotelkeeper's mill soon after the end of August. Marlenberg as a resort was but at the commencement of its career, and sometimes the middle of September saw the arrival of no visitors beyond a few travellers, who broke their journey for a night as they crossed into the Valais from the south over the Geilenpfad, Heutebrun or Spetter Passes.

Also Waldener took a keen pleasure in the expeditions that engendered a freer intercourse with his guests. The Swiss are an independent people, and the average

Swiss hotelkeeper, though he is a model of courtesy, has no obsequiousness of manner and is apt to resent being treated with that eternal consciousness of social differences which many English people cannot give up even if they would.

Waldener had conceived an especial liking for the Kestons and their friends, and he had been hugely pleased and interested when one day he had accidentally overheard Denise tell Geoffrey that she meant to spend her honeymoon at the Hotel Helsenhorn.

Staines descended to the dining-room, where he found the others already engaged over their coffee and rolls.

Mrs Keston presented scarcely any sign of the terrible crisis she had just passed through, although every fibre of her being had been shaken. Abstinence from intoxicating drink, even for so short a time as one week, had wrought a noticeable change for the better in her appearance. Her complexion no longer looked so unhealthy and faded; her eyes were now not

bloodshot and yellow-white, and far less dull. She carried herself with a much more sprightly gait, and that which before had been hysterical and jerky in her manner was now transformed into cheerfulness—almost into vivacity.

At a quarter past five the party left the hotel. The way to the Schimsenhorn lay along the Feldenhofen path as far as that village, and then ascended to the left, opposite the Geilenpfad. Elias Waldener went in front, carrying his ice-axe and a coil of rope slung across his shoulders.

Colonel de Zouchy, who walked last with Staines, was still meditating on methods of wrecking his rival's prospects, and the sight of Denise in front with Geoffrey was of itself enough to enrage him.

The path had memories for Denise; it was the path by which Geoffrey had arrived, the same path where she had read correctly between the lines of his letter. Now she looked back on that day with the calm feeling of pardoning relief with which, in present happiness, one looks back on night-

mare troubles when they are fading into the dimness of the past. How ironically the wrangling river had seemed to speak to her then. How cheerfully it chattered to her now.

For some minutes they walked in silence. Geoffrey also was thinking. Then Denise spoke in a low voice so as not to be heard.

“I overheard papa talking to mother yesterday morning. You know one of the windows of the salon looks out on to the verandah. Well, I was sitting there as usual after breakfast, and they were in the salon. They didn't know I was there, and the window was open, so I could hear all they said. They were talking about us. They have arrived at the conclusion that it is not well for you and me to be together very much. They know we have been in the habit of writing to each other, and they are afraid of what they call “a boy and girl attachment” becoming something more. Mother said we were a great deal too fond of each other as it was, and that, although she liked you very much, you have no



prospects at present, or even for some time to come. So—well, there you are. A great deal too fond of each other already indeed!”

Geoffrey's thoughts were chaotic as he answered, “I think we were quite wise in deciding to see the colonel off the boards before we announce our engagement, as we must do sooner or later. At present it would only infuriate your people uselessly, and in that case one never knows what might not happen.”

“I don't see,” she replied, “how they can prevent us being together. Your ankle is all right now, and they can't very well avoid taking you with us on excursions, especially as we're the only people at the hotel. I do hope no other visitors will come until we are gone, it is so delightful having the valley all to ourselves. We will take every opportunity to be together, you and I, whatever papa says, or mother for that matter. But don't let us go on talking about it. We haven't any plans to make just now, except—”

“Except what?”

“Love each other.”

And so they walked side by side, talking, whispering almost, and gradually the murmuring ceaseless music of the pine woods, and the louder song of the splashing stream, the distant snows glimmering in the faint dawnlight, and the marvellous invigoration of the atmosphere began to affect Geoffrey insensibly.

For a moment he even imagined again that he loved the girl. But that passed, and in a flash he recognised himself for what he was—and shuddered. “It is the chill of the morning which has got into my bones,” he said to himself, in cowardly mental excuse.

Behind them Mortimer Staines was painfully resigning himself to what he imagined to be the inevitable. It was now Saturday the 15th September. Only a fortnight lay before him at Marlenberg,—one fortnight in which to be near *her*. After that she must, so he thought, pass out of his life. Once, he had made up his mind to go away from

Marlenberg and try to forget. But he had loved suddenly; the fever had come upon him with resistless force. He was like a moth on whose vision there flashes the all-annihilating blaze of a great lamp, and now he could not but haunt the flame hopelessly. Like the moth he had not foreseen the scorching light, like the moth he rejoiced in it, and like the moth he dreaded it.

When the party came to Feldenhofen the rosy fingers of the dawn gave way to the great golden heralds who came shouting over the hills and valleys to announce the sun. Swiftly the rich light flooded and poured out of the east, the lurking shadows—formless, monstrous, grey things—fled from their hiding-places behind the rocks as the sun rushed up to the sky.

From Feldenhofen the path ascended to the left across meadows and through woods until it reached a ravine parallel to, and at a considerable height above, the Marlenenthal. At the mouth of this upper gorge the path suddenly ceased, and the climbers had to

pick their way along the banks and sometimes along the bed of a torrent that rushed down from a small glacier on the Bischihorn, which glowed in the golden morning light far up in front at the further end of the gorge. On each side the gorge was flanked by smooth green slopes which broke up here and there into crags.

"Zere by," said Waldener, pointing to a black spire of rock which rose over the adjacent shoulder of the Bischihorn, "is ze top of ze Schimsenhorn, and he ees not so deeficult to climb as he looks. Oh, yes, I zink zat ve shall finish him to-day."

The ravine became bleaker, and soon all traces of vegetation vanished save occasional patches of grass. The torrent bed was blocked by large accumulations of unmelted snow. Only a few hundred yards separated the party from the Bischihorn glacier.

"Will it be necessary," the professor asked, "to use the rope if we cross this glacier, as our direction seems to imply."

"Ach no," answered their guide, "ze glacier here has no crevasses, and eet ees

quite small. Ve shall not need ze rope until ve shall come to ze Schimsenhorn himself."

They arrived at the glacier and climbed on to it. In front rose a slope of slate, mottled with small patches of snow, and above this a great snowfield stretched upward to the summit. It was now nearly nine o'clock, and the sun's rays were smitten back from the snow with gathered intensity, and radiated from it as flame from a burnished reflector.

Suddenly Professor Keston said, turning to his companions, "The glare of the snow in the sunlight is beginning to tire my eyes. I cannot imagine why we brought no goggles with us."

"Eh, well, my friend," answered the colonel, "Mr Staines and I said much the same yesterday, but this is not a climb big enough to make snow - spectacles absolutely necessary; and there is not snow enough to make one blind, which happens sometimes on the great peaks."

"After all," said Staines, "compared with

some of the mountains round Zermatt or in the Oberland, this is quite insignificant. Why, it's only a little over ten thousand feet. I don't think we run any risk, professor."

"Well, perhaps not, but still I should have preferred to have a pair of glasses. At any-rate one would have been far more comfortable."

"The snow is certainly just a wee bit tiring to the eyes," observed Denise. "Don't you find it so, Geoffrey?"

"Slightly. I can imagine that on the Weisshorn, or some peak like that, I should feel as if I were labouring under a nightmare and writing a leading article with an ice-axe for a pen on a brobdingnagian sheet of paper."

"Ha, ha! not a bad simile that, if I may call it so," the professor smiled. Then, turning to his wife, "I hope you are all right, my dear, why—good heavens! you are going to faint."

Mrs Keston was white and tottering. The crisis of the previous evening had affected her more than she knew, and she was not

really fit for the exertion of climbing. The long, toilsome ascent of the ravine had exhausted her strength and shattered her nerve, which gave way altogether under the dazzling glare of the snow. She must have fallen if her husband and Waldener had not supported her. They moved her to the foot of the slate rocks, which rose above the glacier, and seated her in the shade of a small cliff. Her breath came and went in sharp gasps.

She did not faint, however, and after a few minutes a tinge of colour crept back into her face and she attempted to rise, but her husband gently dissuaded her.

All this time she had not spoken ; the sick, dizzy sensation which had suddenly come upon her had rendered her almost oblivious of her surroundings. As this feeling of faintness wore off, she regained command over herself. At last she said, "I really—I really don't think I ought to go on any further."

The others were standing in a group around her. Three of them—Staines,

Denise and the professor—could not help thinking of that other morning, more than a week before, when it had been necessary to help her to return home. And although this present incident was sufficiently distressing, yet it was entirely different from that other. Mrs Keston's faintness, now that they knew it was nothing serious, made them feel almost happy, even in their solicitude, because it brought home to them the change that had been wrought during the past week.

Her husband agreed with her. "No, my dear, I don't think you had better continue with the climb. I myself will assist you back to the Hotel Helsenhorn. But do not let this prevent the rest of you from going on to the Schimsenhorn."

"If I can be of any use," volunteered Staines, "I should be delighted to help you. You might want assistance, you know. May I?"

"It is extremely good and kind of you. And if really it is not troubling you too much I should be most grateful."



“Don’t mention it, professor; it is no trouble at all.”

The colonel had been about to offer his assistance, when he had been forestalled by Staines. Now he proposed to abandon the expedition there and then, and that they should all accompany Mrs Keston, but the professor would not hear of such a thing.

“No,” said he, “why should we interrupt you in what promised to be a most enjoyable climb for all of us? Mr Staines is most kind in offering us his assistance, and, thanks to him, we have no fear for our safe return. Besides, my wife is much better now.”

“Oh, yes,” said Mrs Keston, “and do please go on. It would please me immensely. Denise, you may go with them too. I hope you will all enjoy yourselves so much.” Mrs Keston, although she had determined with her husband that Denise must not be left too much with Geoffrey, saw no objection to her daughter’s going with him then, since the colonel was there also, to say nothing of Elias Waldener.

After some hesitation, the rest of the

party consented to continue the climb. Mr and Mrs Keston, and Staines with them, set about returning. They were to make the journey by easy stages, and since they were not pressed for time, and had food with them, all seemed likely to end well.

They crossed the glacier, and began to pick their way down the ravine.

The others stood and watched them until they were out of sight—Mrs Keston was still shaky, and needed a great deal of help—and then recommenced the ascent of the shoulder of the Bischihorn, slipping now and then on the crumbling slate.

When they gained the snow, Waldener pronounced it safe, and shortly before ten o'clock they reached the ridge which fell sheer away on the other side for 1500 feet, a crag of brown slate, down to a glacier which filled a small angle between the Bischihorn and the Schimsenhorn.

The latter, towering above the glacier with terrace upon terrace of menacing cliffs, o'erhung by the mass of snow that clothed the northern slopes, was connected with the

Bischihorn by a saddle of rock which sloped steeply from each summit.

They ascended along the ridge to the summit of the Bischihorn, from thence the way deflected along the saddle, and mounted finally to the head of the Schimsenhorn.

On the top of the former mountain they rested for a few minutes, and Waldener roped them together, putting Denise next to himself and behind her Geoffrey, the colonel last of all.

Then they began to descend the *arête*, which was narrow and broken up into jagged teeth. On either hand was a clean fall of hundreds, and, occasionally, thousands of feet. There were places where, if anyone had fallen, the rope might have been the means of losing the whole party. But it is impossible to calculate the moral effect of being roped; that will, of itself, carry an individual over places where he would never dare to venture alone.

If Denise had but known it, that climb was curiously symbolical of her life. The crumbling slate of the Bischihorn over

which they had just passed was like Geoffrey's love for her, and the *arête*, with its narrow gable of broken rocks between the sheer precipices, like her path of life, along which she walked, dangerously roped to Geoffrey by the belief that he was true to her.

But the summit—the end—what was that to be? Geoffrey found ample leisure for reflection as they climbed along this *arête*; it occurred to him as an ironical fancy that he was irretrievably bound to Denise by an immaterial bond, far more indissoluble than the rope which connected them just then; furthermore, he observed that his position lay between her and the colonel.

He would have shrunk with horror from the idea of cutting the mountain rope had she slipped. And yet there were not many things he would have shrunk from in order to sever himself from her when she had entrusted herself entirely to him in the matter of a lifetime.

Meanwhile the colonel mentally compared the awkwardness of the young man—who, albeit he was sound of nerve, was no expert

climber — with the instinctive grace of Denise. Although her mountaineering experience was but small, she passed over difficult places with a charming agility that astounded Waldener as he assisted her. She might have inspired a modern sculptor to rival Praxiteles in his conception of female grace and Artemisian loveliness.

And it seemed to the colonel, as he watched her figure gliding in its perfection of feminine outline among the jagged pinnacles of the *arête*, that the grim crags had lost, for a while, their ferocity and were softened by the revelation of a splendid suppleness of beauty.

The *arête* ceased to descend, continued level for a hundred yards, and then rose steeply to the topmost crags of the Schimsenhorn. Far down on the left could be seen the Rhone Valley with the Oberland towering beyond. To the right the view was limited by the Schönhorn and the neighbouring peaks, while somewhat to their rear and on the other side of the Marienthal were the Klampenhorn and the Schielhorn.

There was no conversation among the party as they clambered from rock to rock. The ascent was not superlatively difficult, so far as mere climbing was concerned, but the precipices on either hand made it necessary to use the greatest caution, and left not much room for talking.

At last the ridge melted into the vast mass of the Schimsenhorn, the top of which was less than one hundred feet above.

An angle of nearly seventy degrees, a small longitudinal cleft just wide enough and rough enough to afford foothold, some vigorous scrambling, and the climb was over. The summit was a short ridge running from east to west. A vast snowfield extended down the north side. The *arête* by which the party had ascended divided the precipitous terraces of the western face. The south side was perpendicular almost to the bottom. The east offered the easiest ascent, being a long declivity of snow-strewn slabs, not unlike that on the Bischihorn.

“Here we are at last,” said the colonel.  
“Et maintenant déjeunons.”

They began to eat, and soon finished the food which they had brought with them, and sat there for a while longer, revelling in the magnificent air and view.

The colonel treated Geoffrey with a polished courtesy as perfect as his dislike for that young man. For Colmar de Zouchy was more than Geoffrey's rival—he had conceived an intense personal antipathy for him without exactly knowing why.

The young man was in absolute ignorance of the French officer's feelings towards him, and he had not even formed the slightest suspicion that Colmar de Zouchy knew that Denise was in love with him. He felt somewhat relieved and encouraged at seeing that she was becoming more and more amiable towards the Frenchman.

The passionate anger had now completely abated which Denise had felt for the latter before Geoffrey's appearance in Marlenberg, and she was beginning again to look upon him as the old friend of former days, and to treat him as such, which made him the more wrathful, since he realised that it was only

her happiness in her lover's proximity that was reflected on himself.

"Oh, how I wish the rest were here to admire that view. Just look at that mountain yonder. Do you know its name, colonel?"

To the right of the multitudinous summits of the Monte Rosa, they saw a wonder, a miracle of Titanic architecture, a colossal pyramid clothed in a scintillating garment of ice, almost appalling in its dazzling magnificence, and hugeness that annihilated distance.

"That is the Weisshorn, not very far from Zermatt. It is one of the finest mountains in the Alps."

"Has it ever fallen to your ice-axe, colonel?" asked Geoffrey.

"Pardon, but I am stupid. I do not quite comprehend."

"I mean, have you ever climbed it?"

"No, I have never accomplished the Weisshorn."

"But you have done a great deal of difficult snow-climbing have you not?"



"Yes. But for the most part that has been in the Oberland over there (pointing across the Rhone).

"Why," said Denise, "it's not much more than a week since you made the ascent of the Aletschhorn."

"That is true. It was the day when our friend here came to Marlenberg."

"It will be some time before I forget that day." And Denise's heart echoed that remark of his; it had been on that same day that she had received his letter from the Schweizerhof.

"I can well think that," observed the colonel; "and you were very foolish, pardon my saying it, to attempt to climb the Klampenhorn alone. If Mr Staines and those German gentlemen had not found you, it is possible that you would be there now."

"I wonder whether I should be still freezing."

"It is just possible," said the colonel, somewhat ironically.

"Mr Staines seems to be a sort of guardian angel of this place," said Denise,

with a smile. "First he rescued Geoffrey; then he comforted me by his escort when I went alone to Esend—it was the day before yesterday—and now he is helping my father to get mother back safely to the hotel."

"Staines is a very good fellow."

"I do hope mother will be all right. I don't think her breakdown is anything very serious, just a slight temporary exhaustion."

"Due, perhaps," said Geoffrey, "to a slight chill."

Elias Waldener interrupted the conversation. "Ve must go at vunce, ze clouds are beginning to come up. Look zere."

Clouds were gathering around. It seemed as if another change were about to take place in the weather. Masses of grey mist swept the Oberland from end to end. Many of the Monte Rosa and of the Valaisian Alps had vanished as beneath the folds of a gigantic curtain. The mountains immediately surrounding the Schimsenhorn and the Schimsenhorn itself were still clear save for an occasional feathery fleck of white vapour nestling on their weather-beaten

sides. The sun shone still in undimmed splendour, for it was now only half-past two of the afternoon, and the larger portion of the sky was as yet an immaculate infinity of blue.

Waldener hastily re-roped the party, and they began the descent of the *arête*. A strange sense of oppression came over Denise—the reflection upon her spirits, as it were, of cloud-shadowed inanimate nature.

They climbed slowly along the *arête* which was the one dangerous part of the whole ascent, passing astride in places where the edge was too narrow to afford foothold, and at last found themselves safely on the Bischihorn. Then came the descent to the little glacier at the head of the ravine, down which was the way to the Marlenthal.

Clouds were silently rolling up the southern face of the Bischihorn, and long before the climbers reached the lower end of gorge the backward view was blotted out in grey vapour. When they came to Feldenhofen the valley was in darkness and the sky completely overcast. But the lowering

weather did not damp the spirits of the party, Denise began to shake off the feeling of depression, and they all looked forward to rest and supper at the hotel with that sensation of exultant fatigue which only mountaineering can give.

It was nearly nine o'clock when the party again set foot inside the Hotel Helsenhorn. Waldener went at once to arrange about supper for them, and just as he disappeared Geoffrey remarked, "I suppose the rest have had dinner long ago and are in the salon. Why, what is that? Listen."

The door of the salon was closed. From the interior of the room issued a sound, a ghastly strangulated sound, half shriek and half sob. Then they heard low voices, and then again that sound. The colonel muttered an oath under his breath, opened the door and went in. Denise and Geoffrey followed.

On the sofa lay Mrs Keston, livid, with disordered hair and hands which clutched at nothing, battling with the air in hysterical delirium. Standing by her in tortured

impotence and attempting vainly to calm her were Staines and the professor.

The latter looked up as the colonel came in, rushed to him and said in a low voice, "Ah, my friend, I am so glad — I am so glad that you are come. My wife has had a fearful relapse, and," he whispered, "it is the old trouble.

"*Sacré*," said the Frenchman, "what is to be done?" Then he turned sharply to Denise, "This is not a sight for you. It is best that you should not see it— And you, sir, I am sure that you will oblige me by going to see that none of the servants of the hotel pass by here. If Waldener comes, engage him in conversation. Do anything that you wish, only take care that no one sees us."

The young man bowed and went out to do what the colonel had practically commanded him. In a crisis the soldier in the man flashed out. He met the situation with stern good sense. People did as they were bidden.

Denise turned and went out also, struck

dumb by the shock. Blindly she groped her way upstairs to her room, and on arriving there fell into a passion of weary and disappointed tears.

It seemed as if the clock had been set back a week and that all the old misery must return. Only—there was consolation in the thought of Geoffrey.

Meanwhile, in the salon, Mrs Keston was becoming calmer. The furious motions of her hands ceased, and she seemed to be half conscious of her environment. She sat up on the sofa and glared around wildly with bleared eyes at the three men. Disconnected words broke at intervals from her lips.

All at once she rose to her feet and rushed to the door shrieking, "I must climb that mountain. Denise and Geoffrey are up there. Denise, what are you doing? Come down, I say, at once."

De Zouchy placed himself between Mrs Keston and the door, while the others took hold of her by each arm. Suddenly she said, "Oh, oh, I can't go on. The snow glares so. Take me away, I am blinded.

Ah—" and she sank back exhausted into the arms of her husband. The colonel opened the door cautiously, and beckoning to Geoffrey, said, "The way upstairs is clear, is it not?"

"Yes, quite."

"Colmar de Zouchy went back into the room and assisted Staines and Professor Keston to carry the miserable lady, now almost unconscious, out of the salon and up the stairs. They brought her to her room without being seen either by Waldener or any of the domestics, and laid her on the bed. She shifted and mumbled incoherently for a few moments, and then gradually the muttering ceased and she slept.

"I suppose she will not awake till the morning," said the wretched husband. "I shall have to make myself as comfortable as I can for the night with a couple of deck-chairs and some rugs. I must be near her in case she wakes."

"How did this happen?"

"I cannot account for it at all. After leaving you, we reached here about the

middle of the afternoon. We had tea together, and she seemed particularly cheerful, and merely complained of feeling slightly exhausted; so, after tea, she said that she would go and lie down in her room for a time. She did so, and although she did not come down to dinner, I was unwilling to disturb her in case she might be asleep. After dinner I strolled into the salon, and found her there—in—intoxicated. She must have come down while we were at dinner. At first she was comparatively quiet, and then gradually became more and more excited until she was as you found her. I dared not let her leave the room in case anyone had seen us. After a while Mr Staines came in—”

“It is a very extraordinary thing,” Staines remarked. “And the only conclusion we can arrive at is, that the professor failed to find all her flasks that day, a week ago, and that, well—that she must suddenly have yielded to the temptation of exhaustion.”

“Eh, well,” said the French officer, “it is terrible, but let us hope that this will be the



last incident of the sort. We will take care that it shall not happen again. I go to supper now. *Au revoir*. We will discuss the matter afterwards."

The colonel went down to the dining-room and joined Geoffrey. Soon Denise came down also. The colonel sat silent and abstracted and only spoke at infrequent intervals, while Geoffrey, after an attempt to infuse a little life into the conversation, gave it up as hopeless. Neither did Denise find much to say, and thus the meal passed. Afterwards Denise retired for the night.

Geoffrey, whose ankle was beginning to ache slightly with the fatigue of the long day, spent but a short time smoking before he also went to bed.

Soon after he had disappeared, the three others entered the smoking-room, where Staines, who held something in his hand, turned to the French officer and said, "We found these, colonel, one in the bedroom behind the chest of drawers—for we have been searching the place thoroughly—the other lying in a corner of the salon. She

must have brought this second one down from her bedroom with her and thrown it aside, after finishing it, before the professor found her after dinner. See, it is cracked."

"Tonnerre de Brest!" shouted the Frenchman, as he examined the flask. "Do you remember the shop where we bought the Kodak films?"

"By George! I believe I remember seeing a flask like that. Yes, the stopper was fluted, so. It was not among the goods for sale, but lay somewhere on a shelf behind the counter."

"My wife has not been near Esend for the last week."

"I wonder when she bought this," said the colonel. "But we can easily find out."

"By going to Esend," continued Staines, "and inquiring at the shop."

"Let me see," said the professor, slowly. "It would not, perhaps, be well to be too precipitate. Something else might turn up. But, all the same, we will go to Esend the very first thing on Monday morning."

“What shall I do with these?” Staines asked, pointing to the flasks.

“Give them to me. I will pack them away with the rest. And now I suppose we have discussed the matter enough for the present—for to-night at anyrate. So, with your leave, I will go upstairs. Good-night.”

Colonel de Zouchy and Mortimer Staines were not long in following his example.

## CHAPTER III

### A DAY OF REST

As the clouds, which had brooded over the valley during the night, rolled back beyond the mountains and the splendour of the risen sun gilded the windows of the Hotel Helsenhorn, Professor Keston was still sleeping, covered with rugs, on an impromptu couch made of two canvas chairs placed front to front.

On the bed his wife lay, breathing heavily as she slept, extended on her side, with one arm folded under her head and the other lying loosely along her body. Her hair was scattered over the pillow, and her disordered appearance was emphasised by her being fully dressed.

A ray of sunlight slanted across the room, filled with a living golden dust, and threw

her head sharply into relief, accentuated the pallor of her features, and pitilessly distinguished the grey hairs from amongst the brown.

The professor opened his eyes, stared vacantly in front of him, and then realising where he was, threw off his rugs and rose to his feet, yawning and rubbing his eyes. He turned and looked at his wife for a moment. Then he went to the window, opened it, and stood there looking out on the valley. He felt irritated, miserable, and ill. The unaccountable lapse of his wife, after total abstinence of more than a week, made him despair of ever being able to save her. He could have sworn that he had discovered all her secret store of brandy on the last occasion, and yet here he was circumvented again. Where could she have obtained those two flasks? If his friends had really seen them in the shop at Esend, why, then, the only hypothesis was either that she had been there without his knowledge quite recently, or else that someone had been there for her. As to the first, how recently? When had Staines and De Zouchy last been to that

shop? Wasn't it on Wednesday? he asked himself. Yes, and Staines had been again on Thursday. So his wife must have been down to Esend within the last three or four days. Impossible. Quite impossible. He knew that she had not. Then someone else had obtained the stuff for her. Who? She had not enough ready money to commission anyone. He had taken good care of that, following the colonel's advice. He felt sure that she would not have dared to order spirits to be brought to her by one of the hotel attendants because of the certain exposure when her husband came to pay the weekly bill. No, both hypotheses were exceedingly improbable. Of course Staines *must* be mistaken, and the flasks were only two which he had failed to find. He remembered that on the former occasion he had only ransacked his wife's actual belongings and not the furniture of the room. However, he had searched far more thoroughly last night with the assistance of Staines, and now he was sure that there was nothing left, so perhaps, with De Zouchy's help, all would yet be well.

The professor comforted himself with this thought and felt somewhat better.

Mrs Keston stirred. The rush of cool sweet air into the room, when the window was opened, combined with the sunlight striking on her face, awakened her. She yawned and sat upright on the bed, looking wonderingly with vague eyes, first at her husband where he stood at the window, and then, with increasing astonishment, at herself.

"What on earth has happened?" she said. "Why am I dressed like this? And you, you are up early, William, are you not?"

"Not particularly, my dear," replied the professor nervously, pulling out his watch. "Why, it's getting on for nine o'clock?"

"Will you kindly tell me why I am like this?" she said in a rasping querulous voice. Then her eye fell on the chairs and rugs. "Why, I don't believe you've been to bed all night. Whatever is the meaning of it all?"

"Nothing, my dear, nothing,"

"But there must be something. I don't

understand. Ah, how tired I am," and she sank back on the pillow. She was irritable, and her temper was rising in spite of her languor.

"Nothing, dear — nothing, I repeat. Only" (he stammered) "—er—only a slight er—"

"What?"

"What I mean is this: you were not well last night, dear, that is all."

"But how do I come to be like this?"

"Mr Staines and myself were obliged to carry you up here."

A shadowy remembrance of something having happened came to her, but she could call to mind nothing of what had followed the actual drinking of the brandy, and even about that she was very uncertain. This uncertainty and a lurking sense of shame combined, with her shattered nerves and drink-dimmed mind, to send her into a towering passion. She sat bolt upright and said, "What? You and Mr Staines had to carry me up here? What was the matter? Was I unconscious? I do not remember anything of the sort."



“Er—er—you were not quite conscious,” said the professor, losing his head.

“Then what, may I ask, gave you the right to take me up to bed and throw me down anyhow?”

Her husband was silent. He was naturally a nervous man, and this angry tirade increased his misery and discomfiture a thousandfold and tied his tongue.

“Could you not have treated me decently, you brutes? Not carted me upstairs and left me to sleep the night out in this state. Why did you not summon a doctor? Why didn’t you do something—something—something, I say?”

“You forget there is some difficulty in finding medical assistance in this place.”

“Well, but you could have done something. Why, I ask, why should you leave me to spend the night like this? Is this place a workhouse? Are any of you gentlemen? And I will *not* believe that I was in such a condition as to justify you at all in hustling me away like that. You selfish brutes, you’ve none of you the faintest idea of gentlemanly behaviour. I shall not come

down to-day. I tell you I feel really ill now from the way I have been treated by you. I shall spend the day in bed, and I insist on my meals being served up here."

She ceased, out of breath, and sank back again on the pillow, looking as ill as she said she felt.

It began to dawn on the professor that his wife's tirade was, as usual, nothing to the point, and that if he allowed himself to be victimised there was no reason why she should ever stop. He seized her last remark as a fortunate opening for withdrawal, and said,—

"Very well then. I shall be only too pleased if you think you need it, and if you are really not well. If you will excuse me, therefore, I will leave you to undress yourself. And meanwhile I will ask Mr Staines if he will allow me to wash and change my clothes in his room." The professor collected all his necessaries and betook himself to Staines's bedroom.

"Ah, Mr Staines, I am very sorry to trouble you," he said, as he knocked and entered, "but I should be immensely grateful

if you would lend me your room for a short time just to have a wash and brush up. My wife is awake and is going to spend the rest of the day in bed."

"I am glad of that. It will do her all the good in the world. And by all means use my room. I've nearly finished dressing now, and shall be going down to breakfast in a minute."

"Thank you very much."

After a minute or two Mortimer Staines descended. Colonel de Zouchy and Geoffrey sat at breakfast in the dining-room.

"Good morning," said Staines, taking a seat at the table beside the French officer. "Miss Keston is not down yet, I suppose?"

"I think not. Have you seen the professor this morning?"

"Yes, he came into my room a minute ago. He is there now—dressing. Poor man, he does not seem improved by the night spent in his clothes."

"Did he say anything about Mrs Keston?" asked Geoffrey.

"Only that she is going to spend the day in her room."

“Which will not do her the least harm in the world,” said the colonel.

“But will rather contribute to the well-being both of herself and the community,” remarked Geoffrey.

“It is curious that she should break out again like this; very curious,” Staines observed meditatively. “The question is: Were those two flasks concealed since her arrival in Marlenberg or were they bought (as I suspect) at Esend within the last three days?”

“That we shall see to-morrow.”

“What we must do,” Staines continued, “is to take one of the flasks to the chemist’s shop and ask him if they were bought there.”

“Can you swear to the identity of the flask you saw in the shop with the one you found upstairs?” asked Geoffrey.

“Not positively, but I am nearly sure, and if I am right the whole affair seems likely to become somewhat complicated.”

“We should need a Lecoq,” said De Zouchy. “But I—I will be Vidocq and find out all that there is to be found out touching this affair. But I believe that we were

mistaken, Staines, in thinking that the two flasks are the same. The whole thing is probably quite simple."

"Well, I hope I may prove to be wrong."

"So do I," said Geoffrey.

The door opened, and the professor entered, fresher than when he had risen from his impromptu bed, but still with a depressed and tired air. Good morning, colonel ; good morning, Geoffrey. Many thanks to you, Mr Staines. My daughter is not yet down ?" Then having ordered coffee and rolls from the waiter who entered, he continued, "What superb weather. A day in every way fitted for a long walk, only that it is impossible for me to leave the hotel."

"I shall be slack to-day," said Staines, "and just wander about with a book and a pipe. By the way, I understood that this was one of those hotels where they have an English chaplain during the season. But I don't see any sign of one."

"Holiday - making clerics coining the proverbial honest penny out of the Colonial and Continental Church Society," remarked Geoffrey, while the professor observed,—

“A man of the name of Causton was chaplain here our first Sunday in Marlenberg. But he left the same day that Mr Staines arrived.”

“It’s some time since I went to church,” said Staines, “and I’ve half a mind to go to the church here, since there’s no English service. What time is Mass, colonel?”

A point about De Zouchy which did not at first—to the superficial observer—seem to harmonise with his general characteristics, was that he was a devout Roman Catholic.

“There is Mass at half-past ten this morning,” he replied, “and I go to it.”

“Then I think I will go with you, if I may.”

“Delighted, my dear fellow.”

“Idle habit links us yet,” quoted Geoffrey, with a smile.

The colonel looked at him, but said nothing.

“I should have been delighted to come with you also,” said the professor, “only I fear it would be unwise for me to leave the hotel to-day in case my wife—” He paused as his daughter entered. There was distress in her eyes, and, like her father, she appeared

tired and depressed. She smiled a good morning to all of them, kissed her father, and bestowed on Geoffrey a glance of affection which was not missed either by the French officer or by the Indian civil servant, and sat down.

“I’m not too late I hope, papa. Ah, there is the waiter,” and she ordered her breakfast. “Are you still determined to climb the Klampenhorn to - morrow, Geoffrey?” she asked, after a pause.

“Well, no. Fact is, I shouldn’t really have done the Schimsenhorn yesterday, and my ankle has already reminded me of the fact. So I shall postpone the attempt for a day or two.”

“I think you are quite wise,” said the professor.

After some inconsequential conversation, Staines and De Zouchy left the room, and were soon followed by Geoffrey.

As the latter was going out, Denise asked, “Are you thinking of going to church this morning?”

“Well, no, I was not. Somehow or another I am not in the humour for it.”

“ Why, what’s the matter ? ”

“ Oh, nothing, I assure you. Only I don’t feel in the right mood, and besides I have several things to write. Staines and the colonel are going though.”

“ Are they? Then you might tell them to wait for me.”

“ All right.” He went out to find them.

“ Dear Geoffrey,” Denise thought, “ I wonder what is wrong with him. Never mind, I’ll try and cheer him up. How nice the colonel is, compared to what he was ten days ago, with regard to mother and myself. I can bear with her now much better. And the change in both her and the colonel dates from the day Geoffrey came. Ah, how I have enjoyed myself since last Wednesday, the day that Geoffrey was able to get about. I shall never forgive myself for doubting the dear fellow like that. Poor mother, she makes me very unhappy, and yet somehow I don’t feel so unhappy as I ought. Ah, God is good to me. I must go and thank Him. Surely it doesn’t matter what sort of church I thank Him in, so long as I mean it, and I do mean it.”



Then she said aloud, "Well, papa, I must go and put my hat on. I suppose you will stay in?"

"Yes, my dear, I must."

In a few moments Denise was ready for church. She was dressed simply, in black, with a *fichu* of creamy lace. The picturesque outline of her hat enhanced the charming piquancy of her face.

Staines would have faced an Indian Mutiny alone and unaided only to be rewarded with her hand to kiss. He felt almost grateful for her mother's relapse for the opportunity that it gave him to render the least little service and gain one glance of approval from Denise.

As they stood talking, De Zouchy joined them. As his eyes fell upon the dainty lady he loved, he also felt that power of potential self-sacrifice that Staines experienced. But there was hate mingled with his love, a ferocious dislike for Geoffrey, a fierce rivalry which Staines did not altogether share.

"Let us go now," said the French officer.  
"It is more than half-past ten."

"Very well," said Denise; then, when they were outside and nearing the village, she exclaimed, "Oh, do wait here one moment. There is something I have forgotten, and I must run back for it. I shan't be a minute."

She left them standing and went back quickly to the hotel, entering quietly to avoid attracting the notice of her father who was in the salon, and pushed open the smoking - room door. Geoffrey sat there wrapped in a cloud of smoke.

"Oh, Geoffrey, I was so afraid you were depressed about something, I only looked in just to cheer you up, dear boy," and she kissed him. Geoffrey was silent a moment, then he said, "Thank you, darling, for that. I feel much better for it. Ah, how kind you are to me."

"Dear Geoffrey; but now I must go. The colonel and Mr Staines are awaiting me. *Au revoir*, dearest," and she tripped happily away to join the two men who waited outside.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE INVESTIGATION BEGINS

"HERE we are at the shop," said Staines. "Now, if only the little man is in, we may learn something."

"I am very doubtful of it. I am sure that we are wrong. After all, why should anyone want to make Mrs Keston drunk, unless she was 'cuter than we thought, and sent for it."

"But the professor told me that he had not allowed her to have enough money."

"Still it is just conceivable that she was able to commission someone. And that's far the simplest explanation."

Staines and the colonel entered the shop. "There," said the former as they waited awhile, "that's the shelf in the corner, the one behind the counter."

"Yes, that is it assuredly."

"Well, now, can't you remember seeing

a small glass flask, exactly like the one the professor found in the bedroom?"

"I would not swear that I saw one, but you may be right, and certainly when I saw the flask that other night something made me think of this shop. It is very curious."

"What made me remember the flask was the curious fluting of the stopper. It was only a small matter and not very noticeable, but I have an observant eye."

The proprietor of the shop came out of a room at the back and inquired with an urbane smile of recognition what he might have the privilege of doing for them.

"Ah," said Staines, feeling in his coat pocket and producing a flask, "I should like to know if you are able to recognise this?"

"Why, yes, certainly. It is one of a set that I had. Let me see, I had twelve. But they were not for sale—at least, I did not offer them for sale."

"Can you remember who bought them?"

"I can do that, sir. They were bought early one morning last week—I think it was Friday—by a man, a peasant I should

say. I noticed that he was not pleasant-looking. His face was evil, bad; I could not help feeling that."

"Can you describe him?"

"He was a short thick man with green eyes and a very short beard of thick hair, and also a large bent nose. He was not a young man."

"*Sacré bleu*," muttered the colonel, "but it is Jakob Scherz himself."

"Did he buy anything else?" said Staines.

"No, nothing else. He said that he needed the flasks when he is out on the mountains."

"Did you see which way he went after leaving the shop?"

"No, sir, I did not observe."

"Had you ever seen him before this occasion?"

"No. So of course I could not say the place he came from."

"I must apologise for giving you all this trouble, and thank you for answering my questions. I have only one more, and that is, have you sold any of those flasks to anyone but this man you describe?"

“No, I am almost sure I have not, but nevertheless I will see.”

The chemist opened a drawer behind the counter and bent over it. “No, here are the other six, and I only had twelve at first. That man bought six of them.”

“Well, then, thank you very much indeed. Good morning.”

“Good morning,” added the colonel, and they went out, leaving the little chemist with enough food for thought to employ his leisure for a week.

“Now,” said Staines, “what do you think of that?”

“I think that Mrs Keston is like most women, very clever when she wants her own way.”

“I suppose that must be the solution, and yet—”

“She wanted brandy, and finding herself unable to get any of it, she employed Jakob Scherz to go down to Esend and get it for her.”

“But have you ever seen Scherz hanging round the hotel?”

“No, I must say that I have not seen him.”

“Again, the chemist says that the flasks were bought on Friday morning. It is probable therefore that the postmaster had been interviewed the day before. What did we do on Thursday?” continued Staines, meditatively. “Thursday—now I have it. In the morning we were out with the camera, and in the afternoon I went down to Esend to that very shop with Miss Keston.”

“And I passed the afternoon in developing plates.”

“What was the professor doing?”

“I believe he was reading or writing nearly the whole day.”

“And Mrs Keston?”

“She passed the day at the hotel as far as I can remember.”

“Still it is possible that she may have contrived to see Scherz alone that day, and only on that day, for on Wednesday we were with her the whole morning. In the afternoon I know her husband was watching over her, because they told me about their walk in the evening, and during that evening I am ready to swear she never left the place for a moment. As for the other days, we

were all out together on expeditions. No, I think Thursday was most likely the day when Mrs Keston arranged matters with Scherz—if at all—that is to say—”

“However,” replied the colonel, “the next thing to be done is to go back to Marlenberg and see Mr. Scherz himself, though I expect that we shall find it difficult to make him talk.”

They left behind them the steep meadows above Esend and entered the ravine of the Marl.

Suddenly Staines exclaimed, “By George! but one thing in this affair does seem strange.”

“What is that?”

“Why, you remember the chemist said he had sold six flasks?”

“Yes.”

“But we only found two when we searched Mrs Keston’s effects, and we searched very thoroughly. I feel pretty sure she has no more flasks in her possession now.”

“Then what has become of the other four?”

“That is precisely it. What has become



of the other four? It is unlikely that Scherz would have kept them. He would have no motive. There might have been some reason in it if he had only bought two, and kept the balance of whatever she had given him, telling her that she had not given him enough for more. But then you see he actually bought six. What has he done with the four?"

"*Mon Dieu!* but I hadn't thought of that."

"There is one solution of that question, but I confess it doesn't seem very likely."

"What is that?"

"Is there anyone else who could have sent him for the flasks, who therefore is doling them out to Mrs Keston?"

"It is very unlikely, my dear fellow."

"Certainly I don't see to whose interest it could possibly be to do such a thing."

"Eh, well, we shall see what Mr Scherz has to say."

"Again, if we could find out something about his movements on Thursday, it would help us. But then that is impossible, I suppose. Stay, I wonder if Vane-Wenston could give us any information."

"But how? What does he know about this affair or about Scherz."

"Not much, I expect. All the same I saw him talking to Scherz on Thursday evening."

"What is that? You saw him talking to Scherz? But when?"

"Thursday evening. Miss Keston and I were returning from Esend, and he and Scherz were standing together on the path some way from the hotel."

"We will ask him about that."

"Well, here we are in sight of Marlenberg," said Staines, as they rounded the corner. "I didn't anticipate, when I came up this path a fortnight ago, that I should take part in scenes like these."

It was Monday the 17th September, and the time was about eleven of the morning. The sky was clear save for a few specks of white cloud soaring at an immense height. A light wind, blowing over the mountains from Piedmont, rustled in the woods, and the air was redolent of the sunny freshness of that period when summer is declining to autumn. Here and there from the grass rose the cheerful song of the grasshoppers,

no longer so ceaseless as at the beginning of the month, but yet continuous enough to challenge any suggestion that summer days were done.

Professor Keston had entrusted his two friends with the task of investigating the affair, thinking that his wife might still need his personal superintendence.

“I’ll leave you to do the talking here,” Staines observed, as they approached the shop in Marlenberg, “because you know German better than I, and you will be more competent to cope with our worthy friend if he should attempt to equivocate.”

“Very well,” replied the colonel. “Here is the post-office. Let us enter. I shall go, as you English say, straight to the point; I shall not attempt to argue with Scherz, nor ask him if he recognises the flasks. That would only give him an extra chance to lie. I shall assume from the first that it is he who has bought them. For there can be no mistake about that.”

They entered the post-office and waited for a few seconds. Then a young man came out of the inner room and inquired what they wanted.

"I should like to see Mr Scherz," said the colonel, in German.

"He is away, sir. He left Marlenberg yesterday, and I am in charge of this shop for the present. Did you want to see him?"

"Yes. Do you know where he has gone?"

"No, sir; indeed I do not; he would not tell me."

"Or how long he will be absent?"

"I can't say that for certain, sir. But I think it will be till the end of the month at least."

"There is no one who can tell us where he has gone, or anything about him?"

"I should think not, sir. You see he does not often talk much about his movements. Yesterday evening, at the inn, someone asked where he was, and nobody knew anything about him—in fact, I was the only one who knew he had left the village."

"Still I should be vastly obliged if you would make further inquiries, and let me know in case you find out where he has gone. I am staying at the Hotel Helsenhorn."

"Very well, sir, I will. But I am quite

sure it will be useless. Is there anything else I can serve you with?"

"No, thank you. Good-day."

The colonel and Staines left the shop and made their way back to the hotel. As they went, Colmar de Zouchy remarked,—

"It seems that we are checked unless Scherz can be found, which is unlikely. I wonder if he was prepared for this, but perhaps it is simply a coincidence."

"It's a damned nuisance," said Staines. "But perhaps Vane-Wenston might be able to tell us if he noticed anything on Thursday evening that could give us a clue. You see he might not have remarked it at the time, but if we explain matters he might remember it as being important now."

"Assuredly we will ask him," replied the other.

## CHAPTER V

### AN INTERLUDE

GEOFFREY VANE-WESTON meditated as he strolled slowly up through the wood behind the hotel.

Mortimer Staines and Colmar de Zouchy were on their way to begin their investigation at Esend. Geoffrey was not bound for any particular destination. He had but just finished his morning meal, and now was endeavouring to enjoy a solitary pipe.

Endeavouring to enjoy, for his thoughts revolved about the past. The blue smoke of his pipe twisted round in fantastic spirals and vanished into nothingness before the breeze, reminding him in its mute futility of the letter from Lucerne which had entirely missed its aim because of his own inability to withstand the storm of Denise's rage.

He had now decided that the only thing to be done was to face her boldly and tell the

truth. He might have done it far more safely before, and, he thought, with only half so terrible a scene as he now anticipated. It would be the devil's own luck if he escaped with nothing worse than a sense of secret shame and a deteriorated conscience. Yet he must do this. There seemed, after all, to be no other way out of it. In answer to the suggestion that desertion was the easiest plan there was always the grim reply that she would be goaded into making a clean breast of everything to her parents. And what then?

Or perhaps it was unlikely that she would tell either the Professor or Mrs Keston. For the professor was egotistically unsympathetic to a degree that repelled the confidences of self-abandonment. And Mrs Keston was a drunkard. To whom then could Denise betray herself and him? What of De-Zouchy?

The colonel was elderly, not unsympathetic; and although in love with her, yet more than an old acquaintance, for he had been the friend of her father long before her birth.

What if she confided in the colonel? It

was extremely unlikely; such a confession would be terrible for any girl, but all possibilities must be considered. If she did, all was lost with Geoffrey. For why? The French officer would certainly take more than vigorous steps to enforce her instant marriage with the betrayer; such would be the only course for a gentleman to pursue.

Must he (Geoffrey) be passive and let himself be enmeshed? Pay the penalty of what he had done, and glide gracefully down the slope of shattered illusions into a marriage that was repugnant to him? No. He would not entangle himself and her in a union wherein love was all on one side. Why chain himself to a life of misery? For, practically, such a wedlock would be misery, and for her too, though she did not know that now. Yet at the last she would surely find out, and how would it be with them when disillusionment came to her? When the old memories were obliterated, when she too began to forget.

Would she ever forget? Geoffrey blew a cloud of smoke from his lips.

It would be just as bad afterwards for



Denise as for himself. And, after all, it seemed to him that there was no adequate reason why he should be constrained to marry her. No one else knew of the culminating passion at Sea View. No one else even knew that they were engaged. The whole difficulty lay in the living love of Denise, and if he could kill that—or at the least put himself beyond its reach—he would be safe. If only she could be brought to view matters in the same light as he did all would be well.

And if he had only been firm at that first meeting with Denise at the Hotel Helsenhorn on the previous Wednesday he might possibly have saved himself. It would be a fearful task to nerve himself to face Denise once more and not waver in his determination, yet that was the only way. And surely in the end she would be happier for the riddance of such as he.

It would be a fearful task to nerve himself to face her once more and not waver. Still, he must play the man—he was not man enough to play the gentleman—he must tell her frankly what he felt, and induce her to

give him up. For surely she would not keep him when she knew how he had deceived her once already.

Geoffrey had just arrived at this decision when he heard the sound of footsteps. He turned and looked back along the path. Denise was approaching.

"By George," said Geoffrey to himself, "I'll do it now."

The sunbeams, broken by the foliage, cast golden spangles on her dress as she came towards him, and played over her face in dancing specks of light.

"A good morrow to you, Geoffrey. What does my lord here alone?"

"He meditates," replied Geoffrey.

"What about? May his ladye-love know?"

"Of many things."

"Such as?"

"Yourself, for instance."

"Darling Geoffrey. I was so unhappy, I thought my knight had deserted me."

Geoffrey saw that it would be terribly hard to come to the point. He walked on by her side, while time slid by, along the

smooth grooves of such conversation as lovers use, and after half an hour he was not a whit nearer his declaration of independence.

He was almost resolving on a postponement for an indefinite period of the avowal. Several times the first fatal sentences trembled in his mouth, but each time his power of speech was paralysed by a sudden gripping fear. He could not do this thing; yet, if he did not, he saw only a prolonged agony of deception. He mentally rehearsed all the old arguments; mentally also he heard her replying to them, and the scene that his imagination conjured up was not of a kind which inspired courage for the ordeal. Meanwhile, Denise and he conversed in strains of the most perfect harmony and affection. Suddenly Denise said, "Do you know, Colonel de Zouchy made a complimentary remark about you the other day."

"Did he? What did he say?"

"Well, I had an idea that the dear man was no admirer of yours, but—"

"He should be jealous. But what was it he said?"

"I was going to tell you when you interrupted. Well, he said that he had been reading a short story of yours and that he thought it exceedingly well done."

"How did the colonel come to read one of my things?"

"It was in the *Weekly Whirl*, which Mr Causton, the chaplain who was here during the last month, happened to leave behind when he went away. You know visitors often leave some contribution to the hotel library and reading-room when they go. The colonel was looking at the *Whirl* and he read your story. He said, too, that the insight into human character was so keen that you might have been the subject yourself."

"What is the story called? I have had several in the *Whirl*."

"I am ashamed to say, dear, that I have never read it myself, but the title, according to the colonel, was "The End of an Idyll."

"The colonel was subtle," thought Geoffrey. To Denise he said, "Yes, it was one of my best."

"What was it about?"

“Well, it’s a difficult story to tell you, Denise.” He thought for a moment with agitated eyes, and doubtful questioning lines came out upon his forehead. In the story of which she spoke he had indeed made a psychological study of himself. It was the antiquated tale of a man who, having seduced a girl, finds himself growing tired of her, and sees no obligation to marry her, since all danger is over, and no one has ever suspected. This old subject, treated in an original manner, and inspired with sincerity by absolute experience, had formed the theme of Geoffrey’s short story; it was one of these brilliant and monstrous pieces of egoism which are the product of what is called the æsthetic temperament. Music sad or gay, made from heartstrings—the heart Æolian. The moment faced him with two alternatives. One, to seize the occasion which might never repeat itself, to break with Denise; the other, to evade the answer to her question. If he told her the story he might be able to effect the purpose—and—and—yes, it must be now or never. He braced himself for the plunge and continued: “Yet I will tell it

you. For it is a story of what actually happened once, an ancient tale, served up new by me; about a young man who made a fool of himself with a girl and lived to repent his folly. All the while the girl loved him, and never ceased to love him. But it was useless, for he had no longer any of the old passion. She wanted to marry—but he would not—though he still made pretence of loving her—condemn them both to a life of dreary despair. For he knew that in the end the awakening must come, and what would happen then? Yet his had been the fault. He had led her on, and now he had to tell her the new bitter truth. No one had ever known of their love, so there was no danger. Why should he marry her?"

Denise looked up at him. Something—she knew not what—in his face as he told her the story struck an ominous note in her heart. Somehow—she knew not how—she could not help thinking of his letter from the Schweizerhof. Then she remembered the Frenchman's remark that the author of the story might have been through it all himself.

Geoffrey continued slowly: "So he told her just as I tell you now." The words were well weighed. Denise shrank back quivering. The letter from the Schweizerhof had made a little rift within the lute, which had never completely closed. All her suspicions were only dormant—not dead. Deceived and dazzled by his protestations in the salon on that last Wednesday, convinced—as she thought—by his professions of undying love, she had imagined that all distrust was extinct. But the words just spoken, "As I tell you now," flung the truth upon her in all its ghastly completeness, and flamed through her mind in a single lurid glare of sudden realisation. She looked at him and said nothing.

Geoffrey was appalled by her fearful calmness; he had expected an outburst—a torrent—such as before, not realising that she had then no perfect proof of his treachery, whereas now she had heard it from his own lips. But he went on, "So, Denise, you will forgive me. But let it end here. Blot out this page from our lives and forget as I will forget. No one need ever know. Not a living

soul knows. Find out some better man to love you as you deserve, and let me go my own way into the world, alone—" She interrupted him.

"There is no need to say any more, Geoffrey. And please do not be afraid that I shall say anything to anyone about my poor little dream. So you were the subject of your own story. Only you differed from your hero in that you lied to me while he at least did not lie to that girl. So your letter from Lucerne was—oh, what shall I do?—what shall I do? All my love broken—broken—broken—"

The deep agony of her soul was more terribly suggested by the perfect simplicity of these words than by the most frenzied outpouring of shattered sentences. The infinite desolation of her voice and her white tearless face were the visible signs of an unutterable pain that seemed as if it would burst her heart. As she stood beside Geoffrey at the upper edge of the wood, and looked across the valley, murmuring, "Broken—broken—broken," the scenery began to revolve before her eyes. The mountains,



with their sun-gilded crests, receded, merged and melted into one gigantic mingled mass of snow and rock and forest.

She looked for one moment into Geoffrey's face, which was hardly less pale than her own, then turned from him and swept away down the path, vanishing amid the leafage of the wood.

## CHAPTER VI

### DEVELOPMENTS

#### *Scene I*

“So you have returned, my friends,” said the professor, who stood on the verandah of the hotel as the colonel and Staines approached from the village. “Have you been able to find out anything?”

“Something,” replied Staines, laconically; while the colonel added, “And curious enough.”

“There are several things we cannot account for,” said Staines, as they ascended the steps of the verandah.

“Well?” said the professor, inquiringly. “Let me hear what you have done—we can talk here as freely as anywhere else. What has happened?”

—“You must know, then, first, that the colonel and myself were right about those

two flasks. They were bought at Esend at the chemist's shop. Secondly, they were bought—along with four others of the same kind—by Jakob Scherz, the village post-master—”

“What?” ejaculated the professor.

“There is no doubt about it at all,” said the Frenchman. “The proprietor of the shop described him perfectly, and the question is, What has he done with the other four flasks, and how was he commissioned to get them? We have inquired at the post-office and we learnt that Scherz left Marlenberg yesterday and no one knows where he has gone.”

“We left word,” added Staines, “that if they could find out anything they were to let us know at once. But I do not anticipate much result from that. Now, have you interrogated your wife on this subject at all—if I may be allowed to ask?”

“It has been impossible for me to do so. She is too ill. The result of Saturday evening.”

“I am awfully sorry to hear that. How is she now?”

“A little—but not much better.”

"What is the matter with her?" asked the colonel.

"It would appear to be a species of nervous prostration," answered the professor. "She is very restless, and startled by the most insignificant sound. Now and then she becomes absolutely hysterical, and it is all I can do to calm her. I did not think it safe to leave her until about a quarter of an hour ago, when she seemed to be fairly soothed. Then I came down here, both to see if you had returned and also to enjoy a quiet cigarette."

"And I suppose," remarked Staines, "that in any case it would be almost impossible to get any information out of her."

"We will discuss the question later in the day," said the professor, "for now I must not leave my wife alone any longer. I shall see you all again at lunch, I presume," and he went into the hotel.

"The next person to see," said Staines, "is Vane-Wenston. I wonder where he is."

At that moment Elias Waldener came out. The colonel turned to him. "Do you happen to know where is Mr Vane-Wenston?"

"I could not say now," was the reply, "but I saw him go out long times ago up to zat wood. I dink he haf not returned," and the landlord passed on towards the village.

"I wonder," said the colonel, "if Waldener knows anything touching Scherz. I will go after him and ask him."

"And I," said Staines, "will stroll up there and see if I can find Vane-Wenston."

"I suppose that I shall see you again at *déjeuner*," remarked the colonel as he moved off. "This detective business is an exciting means of passing the time. *Au revoir*, Staines."

### *Scene II*

Mortimer Staines walked slowly up the path into the wood where, nearly a fortnight before, he had overheard Denise and her mother disputing about De Zouchy. He had not gone far when he saw Denise coming towards him.

More than an hour had passed since she had left Geoffrey at the upper end of the path. During that time she had been sitting by herself in the sun-chequered shade of the

trees, wearily and tearlessly alone with her thoughts. There had been no passionate outburst of grief as when she had received his letter. This blow was overwhelming, all-shattering, and now, in mute desolation of soul, and mind, and body, she was making her way slowly back to the Hotel Helsenhorn.

When he had first caught sight of Denise approaching, Staines had been about to salute her and inquire if she had seen Vane-Wenston, but as she came nearer something closed his lips, for he saw that she was in some great distress. As he looked up the pillared aisle of sombre pine trees and saw her pale face, as he neared her and the silent anguish of her eyes seemed to leap at him across the intervening space, and as he realised the measure of his love, every fibre of his being was thrilled with a responsive and unreasoning pain that was simultaneously sweet and bitter in the keenness of its sympathy, in its powerlessness to help.

She, on catching sight of him, summoned all her self-command in one brave attempt to appear as if nothing had happened, murmured, "Good - morning, Mr Staines,"

and passed on, while he, realising that this was no time for more than the merest word of greeting, raised his hat and continued his way up the path.

As he went he tried to imagine what had taken place. Vane-Wenston must have been responsible for her distress. So there had been another scene in this wood. First the mother and daughter, and then the daughter and lover. Staines's wrath rose as he thought that this young man (and always the epithet "contemptible" suggested itself as the fitting one for Vane-Wenston) had caused Denise to feel pain.

"I should like to kick that youth," muttered Staines. "Ah, well, 'twill all be a thing of the past, of *my* past, in little more than a week. And I daresay she's happy enough with him—a passing cloud, etc.—and yet—what I saw of her face did not suggest exactly that. All the same it's no business of mine, yet perhaps I *have* an interest, for I love her, yes, I love her. But my interest in her, what is it? A reversionary interest. Hum, scarcely even that."

He smiled ironically, with a stern and

almost humorous contempt at his own impotence.

When he came to the end of the path Staines looked around to see if there was any sign of Vane-Wenston, but there was none. For just as on the day of the Engenhorn Denise and her mother had taken that way, and returned by a circuitous route, so had Geoffrey, on this morning, descended the skirt of the wood until he found himself on the Marlenberg-Esend path, not far from the corner, and had ultimately regained the hotel at the moment when De Zouchy disappeared among the châteaux of the village and Staines among the trees of the wood.

The latter, when he had made certain that Vane - Wenston was nowhere to be found, flung himself down on the grass for a rest, and remained there listening to the muffled thunder of a distant cataract, while his mind revolved around Denise. He sat on, heedless of the flying minutes, until more than an hour had gone by, and when he rose to his feet and knocked the ashes out of his pipe, the time was past one o'clock.



*Scene III*

Geoffrey, on his way back to the hotel, was in an exceedingly unenviable frame of mind. But there was one grain of consolation left in the general bitterness of his thoughts, and that was the assurance of Denise that no one would ever know. For the rest, he had self-respect enough left to hate himself for the scene he had just gone through. But this self-hatred was a rapidly-diminishing quantity and easily to be appeased, especially when he reflected that in the end all would be well for himself and better for her. By the time he came in sight of the hotel he felt more self-congratulation than self-hatred, and had determined to save himself from further unpleasantness by taking the earliest opportunity of leaving the village altogether. "What a fool I was," he said to himself, "not to think of this before. Why, although it might have been unsafe to desert without saying anything, if only I had stuck to that letter it would have been all right. As for that other plan, I must have been insane to think of it. If only I'd had the nerve to

stand firmly by the letter, all the trouble of this confounded melodrama might have been saved. As it is—but it doesn't matter now. By George, but she is magnificent for all that! How splendidly she went through that scene! Damn it, but it shook me. I wonder whether I should have had the nerve to go through with it if it had not been for that lucky remark of hers about the colonel and my story. The end of an idyll . . . an idyll. . . ."

The hotel seemed deserted as Geoffrey approached from the Esend path, for the professor was indoors with his wife and the colonel not yet back from the village.

Geoffrey never saw Denise coming down the woodland mountain path behind the hotel, never saw her stop suddenly as she caught sight of him and draw back among the tree-trunks out of sight.

As he entered there was a footstep on the stairs and Professor Keston appeared, wearing a somewhat haggard and worried look.

"Good-morning, professor, I don't think we have seen each other yet to-day."

“Good-morning, Geoffrey. I am so worried, my dear boy. My wife is becoming worse and worse.”

“I am sorry to hear that. What is it exactly that she is suffering from?”

“As I was telling the colonel, not long ago, it seems to be a sort of nervous prostration induced by—by what happened the other night. She was calmer a short time since, but now she is quite hysterical. And I don’t know what is the best thing to do. I am certain she will suffer terribly—perhaps permanently—unless medical assistance be rendered her. Now I wonder if you would go down to Brig at once and fetch Dr Hartmann. You could get back by to-night. I should be immensely grateful to you. I cannot very well ask Mr Staines or Colonel de Zouchy, as they have both been so kind already, and besides, the doctor is wanted as soon as he can possibly be brought, and I do not know where either of them are. Will you do this for me?”

“Certainly, professor, with the greatest pleasure,” said Geoffrey.

“Thank you, my dear boy, so much,

thank you so much," repeated the unfortunate man. "I shall not forget it. Do you think you could start at once?"

"Why, yes. I can get lunch at Esend, which I shall reach in about two hours. I shall arrive at Brig about four hours later, or less, because I can take the diligence, or in any case I'll hire a conveyance of some sort."

"Thank you again and again. And now, *au revoir*, my dear boy. Tell Dr Hartmann to come at once. There may, of course, be a doctor at Esend. But I prefer Hartmann, as we know him since he attended you. Good-bye, then, Geoffrey, and good luck go with you." And the professor went upstairs in an ecstasy of gratitude. He was a simple-minded man.

Geoffrey got his stick and set out. He paused awhile before he had gone twenty steps, for it occurred to him that it might be a brilliant idea to send the doctor up post-haste from Brig and then make his own departure by the railway, which has its terminus there. Only a very few moments would be occupied—he thought—in packing his bag and ordering it to be sent after him.

He had no heavy luggage, there would be no difficulty. But he judged it wiser to wait and not make any such sudden departure, for that might seem strange, and besides, he was quite safe now. Denise would soon be quieted.

So Geoffrey Vane-Wenston started without any delay, unaware how much depended on his decision.

#### *Scene IV*

Colmar de Zouchy followed Waldener and overtook him in the midst of the village.

“Do you want to speak to me, sir?” said the hotel proprietor, in his native language, when he saw who came after him.

“Yes, I have something I should like to ask you. It is—about Jakob Scherz. Did you know that he had left Marlenberg?”

“No, sir. I certainly had not heard that.”

“But it is so. He left yesterday afternoon, it seems. And not a single person knows where he has gone. I wanted to ask you if you knew anything about it,

because I have a little matter to settle with Mr Scherz. So you can tell me nothing?"

"Well, sir, I fear I cannot give you much information. But have you asked Mr Vane-Wenston?"

"No. I have not seen him yet. Besides, what do you suppose he would know about Scherz that would help me?"

"Not much, I daresay. Still, he was talking to Scherz yesterday morning."

"What!"

"Yesterday morning, sir. That must have been before Scherz left."

"How do you know this?"

"I was passing through the village, for I did not go to mass that morning, and I saw Mr Vane-Wenston just in front of me. He knocked at the door of the post-office, and was admitted a moment later by Scherz, and the door shut after him. That was all I saw. Of course I did not attach any importance to the incident, as it was no business of mine. Still, when you asked me about Scherz it struck me that Mr Vane-Wenston might possibly know something about the matter."

"Certainly he might," said the colonel, grimly. "Well, thank you very much, I won't detain you any more now. Good-morning," and the colonel returned towards the hotel, while Waldener passed on about his business.

All the French officer's suspicions were now thoroughly aroused, while at the same time he was absolutely mystified.

What was this connection between Vane-Wenston and Jakob Scherz? Staines said he had seen him speaking to the post-master on Thursday. Very extraordinary!

The colonel was prejudiced against Geoffrey and quite ready to put the worst possible construction upon the least of his movements. And here was something really suspicious. To sum up what had happened. First, Vane-Wenston was seen speaking to Scherz. Second, the very next morning Scherz went down to Esend and bought the brandy which was purveyed somehow to Mrs Keston. Third, Vane-Wenston was again seen with Scherz. Fourth, almost immediately afterwards Scherz left Marlenberg.

Was there any connection between these incidents? Could it have been Vane-Wenston who had commissioned Scherz. Why? What interest had he?

On the verandah the colonel paused, took out a cigar, lit it, and seating himself on a canvas chair continued his reasoning.

Assuming, for the sake of argument, that Vane-Wenston had something to do with this affair, what was to be deduced? Sum up the facts again: he speaks to Scherz on Thursday evening. On Friday morning Scherz makes a journey to Esend and buys brandy. On Saturday Mrs Keston drinks that same brandy. On Sunday morning the colonel and Staines argue about the matter at breakfast in presence of Vane-Wenston. (Here the colonel became excited as one by one he marked the points in his mind.) Soon afterwards, on that same Sunday morning, Vane-Wenston has another interview with Scherz, and lastly, the latter vanishes.

To the colonel this looked like circumstantial evidence, and the point on which his mind especially dwelt was the fact that



Vane-Wenston had been present at the conversation on Sunday morning. For hearing that the flasks were recognised he immediately must have gone and placed Scherz, in some manner, probably by bribery, out of the way of any inconvenient interrogation. If to all this were added the crowning fact that four flasks out of six were still unaccounted for, a large burden of suspicion must rest heavily on Vane-Wenston.

“Why,” said the colonel to himself, “why, if I am correct he must have still in his possession the other four. And to prove or disprove my deductions I will search his room as soon as I can, be the risk what it may.” He shrugged his shoulders—the thing was by no means to his liking—but he was not a man to stick at trifles where so much was involved.

### *Scene V*

By the time De Zouchy had regained the hotel, Geoffrey was vanishing round the bend of the Marlenthal.

As the soldier came to the end of his

reasoning and was considering whether the present time were fitted for the exploration of the young man's room, the professor appeared for the third time in the doorway.

"Ah, colonel! so you are back. Where have you been for the last twenty minutes?"

"Investigating," was the answer.

"Ah, well! We must discuss it later. But now I am looking for Denise. Her mother keeps on calling out for her, and it may comfort my poor wife if she would sit by her bedside. Do you know where she is?"

"That I do not, my friend. But—why—*la voila!*" For Denise, having seen Geoffrey go away, was approaching the hotel. The professor was far too much worried himself to notice his daughter's face, but the colonel saw it, and marvelled.

"Denise," said her father, "you are wanted, sorely needed, I may say, by your mother. Will you come and sit by her? It will do her so much good."

"Certainly, papa. I will do everything in my power to help you. Poor mother—" her voice broke.

"Well then, come along."

"One moment," said the colonel, as they were going. "Can you tell me where is Mr Vane-Wenston? I want to speak to him."

"At the present moment he is on his way to Brig to fetch Doctor Hartmann for my wife. I asked him to go and the dear boy" (Denise's lip quivered) "was only too pleased. He went at once."

"When was this?"

"Not more than ten minutes ago. He will be back by the evening."

Denise and her father disappeared. The colonel twisted his moustachios and smiled grimly. "Quelle bonne fortune," he said. "Il faut en profiter." He arose and went straight to Geoffrey's room.

Once inside he wasted no time. With all the calm speed of the man accustomed to act in all and every kind of danger he locked the door securely in order that he might not run any risk of interruption. Then he began the search, starting with the chest of drawers. Drawer by drawer was opened—it chanced that none of them were locked—ransacked and replaced in good order.

Clothes were rifled and left looking as though they had never been touched. Finally there remained only the travelling-bag to be searched.

The colonel tried the fastenings and found that the bag was locked.

He hesitated a moment, searched his pockets, and produced a ring of keys.

One by one he tried these and found none that fitted. Then he reflected that if he smashed the lock Vane-Wenston would probably never be able to find out who had done it. Besides, even if the thing that he was doing was not altogether scrupulous, still it was worth while if he could only prove or disprove his theory.

The bag was a small Gladstone, fairly new and with a lock that was by no means feeble. On each side of this was a leathern handle.

The colonel seized one of these in either hand, lifted the bag from the ground, and tore the lock apart with one tremendous wrench. There was a sharp sound of breaking glass, a splash, and sudden smell of alcohol, and four flasks, of which two had

been cracked together by the shock, flashed on the floor amid the scattered confusion of the bag.

“*C'est bien !*” remarked the colonel, seeing them.

## CHAPTER VII

### IN WHICH THE COLONEL'S DISCOVERIES ARE CONSUMMATED

COLONEL DE ZOUCHEY started his midday meal alone. He was more mystified than ever, for although he had established the charge he had yet to discover the motive. Indeed, it seemed as though all the young journalist's interests lay in precisely the opposite direction. This was exactly what Geoffrey had anticipated would be thought by anyone who might chance to suspect him.

Even if the colonel had any glimmering idea that Geoffrey's love for Denise was not quite sincere, even though he had remarked somewhat cynically on the "End of an Idyll," he had not the faintest suspicion of the story's terrible application.

And even had he certain knowledge of all these things, the plan that Geoffrey had conceived for his own deliverance was so

outrageously grotesque that Colmar de Zouchy might never arrive at the whole truth.

However, it seemed to him that there was one certain course of action, and before that, no more to be done or reasoned. He would at once expose Geoffrey to Denise, for his own sake chiefly, and then to everyone else.

As he was determining upon this, Staines came in with a graver look on his face than was usual. Saluting the colonel carelessly, he sat down and called for his lunch.

For once they were each of them uncovetous of the other's company, and conversed only in snatches of commonplace. Staines was so lost in thinking about his love that he did not trouble to mention the other affair to the Frenchman, beyond an inquiry as to whether anything fresh had been learnt. And when the colonel replied that he was still following up a clue, and would inform Staines as soon as his investigations should be complete, the latter did not trouble to press the query any further.

At last De Zouchy finished eating and

left the dining-room. Determined as he was to waste no time in carrying out his purpose, he ascended to Mrs Keston's bedroom and knocked at the door. After a silence of ten seconds the professor came out on tip-toe. "Oh, it is you, my friend," he whispered. "Come in, but step quietly. She is sleeping now, thank God!"

The Frenchman entered with the professor as noiselessly as possible. By the bedside sat Denise, pale, motionless and beautiful, with sombre eyes and firm-set mouth, which was tense with the repression of seething emotion. On the bed lay the sleeping form of Mrs Keston, outlined sharply in the bed-clothes, which were gathered tightly around her. A part of her neck was visible, netted in the tangled meshes of her hair that streamed down in disorder over her cheek and dabbled the white texture of the sheets. The appearance of her face as she slept, with her brows contracted into pallid wrinkles and her mouth half open, was ghastly in its expression of nerve-racked imbecility. And herein lay the whole secret of the failure of Geoffrey's miserable scheme. There had



been two things he never calculated upon— De Zouchy's zeal for Mrs Keston's welfare and Mrs Keston's progress in dram-drinking. His experience of the latter had led him to believe that brandy would merely make her hysterical and *farouche*, opening a new vista of opportunities for his rival. Never had he dreamed that she would drink so much at once as would not only render her delirious, but seriously endanger her life.

As the colonel looked at her, a mad rage against Geoffrey filled him, and his eyes gleamed. Then he bent down to Denise and whispered, "May I have the honour of speaking to you alone? I have something that I desire greatly to make known to you. Will you come outside for a short time?"

"Certainly, colonel, I will, if you would not mind waiting a moment. I must ask papa first if there is anything he would like me to do." She went across to her father, who was standing gloomily by the window.

The professor said that there was nothing further required of her, and Denise left the room together with the colonel.

Outside in the passage she turned and

looked at him. "What is it you want?" she said.

"Not here, my dear Denise, not here. Let us go somewhere that we may be able to talk in absolute quietness. Outside for instance."

"No, not outside. Anywhere but outside." She was thinking of the morning.

"Then let us go up to that room which Waldener gave me to use as a dark room. I am not developing any plates at present, so the window can be opened. No one will disturb us there."

"Very well."

They ascended to the upper floor. The room in question was small, and although originally intended for a bedroom, had never fulfilled that purpose. Waldener had used it as a lumber-room and for the storage of superfluous furniture. De Zouchy had abolished all of it except a couple of chairs and a couch. Now the room was littered with photographic apparatus, while a thick curtain covered the window.

The colonel drew the curtain aside and opened the window to ventilate the room,

which smelt strongly of chemicals. Then he handed Denise a chair and they sat down.

For a moment there was silence, while the colonel sought for words, abstractedly watching the myriad specks of dust floating in a sun-ray that smote across the room.

Then he began. "My dear Denise, it is a great pain to tell you what I have to tell you, and I will try to use as few words as possible. Your poor mother has given us all great trouble during our sojourn in Marlenberg. But for one week your father and I have been able to save her from—from herself. Last week, it was Saturday, she drank some brandy again. Is it not so?"

"All this is very true. But why go into all that misery over again?"

"That is precisely what I have to discuss. Now, you have wondered how she obtained the drink, and deceived both your father and myself?"

"I knew that Mr Staines and yourself were investigating and I was waiting to see what you would find out. I could not come to any conclusion myself."

“*Eh bien*, I have found out. But, see here, this was the first result of our search, and basis of our search afterwards.” The colonel produced one of the flasks that Staines and the professor had found on Saturday night. Then he continued, “So Mr Staines does not know yet. For I have beaten him at the detective game, and I would not tell him until after I had told you.”

“Well, what have you discovered?”

Then the colonel recapitulated all the points of the investigation, beginning from Saturday evening, weighing and comparing the evidence, and welding it into a damnatory circumstantial chain. He concluded with, “So I, what do I do? I put two and two together, as one says in English, and I compare the facts, and—but I will not annoy you with more details; *enfin*, I decide to search Monsieur Vane-Wenston’s room. In the bag I find four like this. The colonel produced another flask which he had brought with him, and placed it on the window-sill. “See, compare it with the other, they are identical. Observe the stoppers. So, they are fluted in exactly the same fashion. And

that is how I found the other four flasks which Jakob Scherz bought at Esend."

The colonel paused to see what effect this had on her. Somewhat astonished that she said nothing, and baffled by her pale face, with the sombre eyes and dull expression, he continued, summing up,—

"So Mr Vane-Wenston has made your mother drunk. I can fill in the gaps in the chain now that I have proved the certainty of what he has done. He bribed Scherz with money to get the flasks, then he placed them in your mother's bedroom when no one was there. So much for the first step. After that, when he heard that Mr Staines and myself, who were discussing the matter before him at breakfast on Sunday morning, had recognised the flasks, and that we were resolute to go and search, he perceives that the only thing to be done is to make Scherz go away. So he bribes him to leave Marlenberg; which must have cost him something. Still he did it. That was when Waldener saw him enter *chez* Scherz on Sunday morning. *Eh bien, le voilà! enfin*, was it not unfortunate for him that Mr Staines and I

are photographers? Otherwise we should never have gone to the chemist's shop at Esend."

Denise had listened in silence. It was as if the blow she had received in the morning had deprived her of the power to experience further emotion of any sort. Nothing moved her now. She sat there before the colonel's gaze, pale and speechless, her mind a chaos. She did not disbelieve what he said. The proofs he had given her were too ample. Only the fact that Geoffrey had done this additional horrible thing conveyed nothing to her mind. Why had he done it? She did not know. She could frame no idea. Everything was blank. All her love was broken—broken—broken.

At last she spoke in a hard, strained voice. "I suppose you have proved this too conclusively to disbelieve it. But do you know why he has done it?"

Then the colonel rose to his feet. "What? Is it nothing to you that he—your lover (Denise shivered)—has done this? You love him. I thought that he loved you. And now, when I tell you of this horrible

thing that he has done, you sit there silent and cold, and say nothing. I cannot tell you why he has done this. But it is a fact that he has done it. Does he love you really? Does he love you as I do? Oh, Denise, Denise, I am old and grey—it may be—but I love you. Now that you know his infamy, will you not have me now? Will you not have me, I say?"

"Colonel, colonel, you do not know what you are saying. Cannot you see how I suffer? Please leave me alone."

The colonel held himself in with an iron grip of will, and said quietly, "Very well then. But I desire to ask you one thing. Have you ever told Vane-Wenston that I love you? And have you told him that once I was unworthy of the name of an officer of France?"

There was a dead silence. Then she said quietly, "Colonel, please do not ask me that."

"Ah, you have told him; then I will tell you something. He does not love you really. Now, now I see the meaning of a thousand trifles. He gave your mother the

drink to the end that I might be tempted again to use her, and so that at last you would be forced into marriage with me. Is it not so? Did you really imagine that he loved you—that cur?”

“Colonel, please leave me alone. Can't you see I suffer?”

“Denise, will you let him attain his end even in his failure? Will you let him alone for ever and marry me after all? I will be true to you, so true. Ah, my darling, I will live and die for you.”

“Oh, my friend, for I believe you, I will answer you at another time. Leave me now.”

“Why will you not answer me now? Oh, *mon Dieu*, I see it, I see it! I know now why you were so cold, so pale, when I told you of his infamy; before I told you, yes, even this morning, he had seen you in the wood. He knew his plans were failing, and he told you himself, but how did he find courage? Ah, how could he find courage? Oh, my darling, my *cherie*, forgive me, forgive me—”

For Denise had fainted.



She had been sitting with her head bowed upon her arm which rested on the window-sill, and as she lost consciousness she fell together limply in her chair.

De Zouchy seized a water-bottle which chanced to be in the room. Then he bent over the girl and sprinkled her forehead till she revived.

He judged it best to leave her to herself for a while. So, telling her that he intended to come back presently, he withdrew and made his way downstairs to the smoking-room, his mind a swirling maelstrom of chaotic emotion. Every now and then he muttered, "That young cur. How did he find courage?"

On the table lay the copy of the *Weekly Whirl* in which he had read the "End of an Idyll." The idea flashed into his mind that after all Geoffrey had been the subject of his own story. He picked the paper up and glanced through it. "So that is how he found courage." And all at once a fearful overwhelming thought, that would not be put away, came to him, "Oh, my God! it is not possible. Yet without it, would he have

grown tired of her? Would he have been so anxious to avoid a marriage with her? Would he have been so afraid to break with her openly, that first he must have tried a plan like that and failed? Ah, my God, but it must be so. Oh, Holy Virgin, grant that it is not so. Yet—ah, I see the whole thing now. Well might she have fainted.”

Crushing the journal between his fingers he dashed upstairs to the dark room. This was a terrible thing that he was going to do, but he was maddened with love and doubt and revulsion. All his composure had gone. He was utterly carried away, and had lost all mastery of his words and actions. He must know the truth, the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. He flung the door open and entered.

She was sitting on the couch with bowed head and hands covering her face.

“Denise. Do you see this?”

“What of it?”

“The story. ‘The End of an Idyll.’ Is it true I say? Oh, that I had fallen dead before it had been possible for me to say that

word—true. It is the history of your relations with him, not half of it, but all of it. Is it true? Great God, but I know that it is true. Answer me. You must answer me, I say.”

“Go!” Never had Denise looked more splendid than when she arose to her feet and uttered that single word.

“Ha! it is the truth. Yes, you do not dare to deny it. You cannot, you tremble, you—”

“Go!”

The colonel mastered himself with a gigantic effort that seemed as it were to throttle him. He had no longer any doubt. His emotions had endowed him with an intuitive perception of the truth, which, if it needed any confirmation, was written in her face: written there—but only for one lightning moment. The strain was becoming more than she could bear, and when the colonel had confronted her with his challenge she had felt as if she were being swept with the wave of some irresistible tide, and then—and only then—in that first shock she had allowed her face to betray her. A second,

and she recovered herself, but too late—the French officer had seen, and now he said quietly, “Yes, I will go. I am calm now. Ah, but it is all over now. *Mais que faire ?*” And then outside the door rage mastered him and he muttered, “All over ; but *he* shall make reparation for what he has done. I go to find him.”

Within ten minutes the colonel was striding round the corner where the Esend path turned at the bend of the ravine.

His temperament was one which was ever obsessed by a dominant idea. Half measures were impossible with him. His love, blazing but an hour ago, was chilled and extinguished as a bar of white hot steel that is plunged into the smithy's bath. As he rushed up the path he was nothing but a concrete embodiment of rage and fury.

He must find Vane-Wenston at once ; he must find him alone, and speak with him. One thing was certain, he could never expose the young man to anyone else. The affair of the brandy must be entirely hushed up. And then he (Colmar de Zouchy) would

go away back to Paris, never again to set eyes on Denise, never again to think of her. How could he endure even her memory when her memory was such as Geoffrey Vane-Wenston had made it?

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE BEGINNING OF THE END

DURING the afternoon Mortimer Staines sought relief and distraction in strenuous exercise. He set out in nearly the same direction as on his first arrival at Marlenberg, and ascending the heights that lay beyond the village to the south, roamed amid a tempestuous magnificence of wild crags that well accorded with his spirit.

At last, when the glory of the setting sun flamed above the western mountains, and flung long shadows over the Marlenthal, he descended to the valley, lingering for a while as he passed at the spot where he had first seen Denise.

He remembered her exactly as she had been sitting on that day—only one fortnight since—Monday the 3rd of September.

Of all the thousand and one aspects, of all the changing charms of attitude and enchant-

ing mannerisms, characteristic of her, that were indelibly impressed on his mind in a series of ravishing pictures, this, the first, was the one his thoughts most loved to linger on.

How actual and vivid it was! The colour and form of it, the very feeling of the air, the resinous smell of the pines, all came back to him with a poignant and penetrating sweetness.

Standing on the path, he lit his pipe once more and through the blue arabesques of smoke he caught her image with sunlight playing around her seated form and on her face and hair.

He knew that he could never tear his idol from the altar niche where he had placed it.

Love had not smitten him, as it smites the young, with sudden madness, making the soul the battle-ground of all emotion, but it had overtaken him like a vast wave, not bursting on him, but involving him before he was well aware and sweeping him steadily along.

He often wondered what she thought of

him. She could not know what he felt ; he had never allowed the slightest indication of it to betray him.

Now he took from an inner pocket that handkerchief of hers that he had stolen : a harmless theft, and a sweet one. He gazed at it, feeling the fine texture with fingers that seemed almost irreverent. It was one of those delicate creations of lace that, having an intrinsic charm of form, become adorable when hallowed by the sentiment of association with the woman one loves.

No inanimate thing in the world is more feminine than lace. No inanimate thing can symbolise better the inexpressible sacredness of memory. Even a glove, that scented sheath of a well-beloved hand, has not such an inherent tenderness.

He went slowly back to the hotel, walking as a man lost in thought.

Besides Staines himself, at dinner, only Denise and her father were present. Staines was rather astonished to see that Denise's face wore a look of intenser suffering even than he had seen on the woodland path.

"Something serious has happened," he



thought, and was wondering what had become of Geoffrey when Professor Keston volunteered the information that Geoffrey had gone down to Brig to fetch Dr Hartmann.

“Doubtless, he will be here soon; in an hour’s time, perhaps; Brig is quite a long distance away.”

Staines fancied that the girl shivered slightly, but he was not sure.

Not one of the three had any idea as to where Colonel de Zouchy was, though Staines, who knew that in regard to Denise the colonel was in the same case as himself, thought it not unlikely that he was still absent on a climb or long walk.

After dinner the professor took Staines aside and said, “Mr Staines, I want you to engage my daughter in conversation for the present. She must on no account come upstairs to me. I would not have her unnecessarily distressed—and—and, oh, Mr Staines, I believe my poor wife will die. God grant the doctor may come soon.”

So that Staines found himself alone with Denise in the salon.

"How dark it is," said she, looking out of the window, which was open.

"Yes, to-night there is no moon."

"It must be the new moon now. I remember it was at the full about the time you arrived in Marlenberg."

"Yes, it was," replied he, with a half sigh, thinking of the day following his arrival, when they had ascended the Engenhorn.

"I sometimes think," she continued, "that the roads and paths in this part of the world must be rather frightful when the nights are so dark."

"Which is proved now and then by a robbery or outrage or accident of some sort; but, after all, such things may just as easily take place in full moonlight or broad daylight."

His mind reverted to that evening walk up from Esend, when also he had seen Geoffrey talking to Jakob Scherz. He wished the colonel would come back that he might consult with him, and find out what had happened, or if anything had happened.

"I wonder where the colonel is," said he.

"*That* I am afraid I know no more than

you." Denise spoke quite quietly, and Staines perceived nothing. After a moment's pause, while she left her place at the window and seated herself in a chair, Staines said, pulling out his pocket-book, "By the way, I have here the photos which the colonel and I took last Thursday morning in the Heilthal. I brought them down from my room just before dinner, thinking you might like to look at them. Besides, the colonel and I had a bet as to who had done the best, and we should like you to decide. Here they are."

He had placed the pocket-book containing the photos in the same pocket with the lace handkerchief when he changed his clothes before dinner. In some manner a fold of the handkerchief was now covering one side of the case, and as Staines took hold of the latter, to pull it out, he unwittingly grasped the fold as well, and, before he realised what had happened, he was holding the book with the dainty lace dangling from his fingers.

Denise looked at him in amazement. He recovered himself almost instantly. "Ah Miss Keston, you dropped your handkerchief the other day. I found it, and I am sorry to

say I had forgotten to restore it. However, here it is now."

He hated himself as he said this. But what could he do? The time was not at all propitious for an avowal.

"Thank you, Mr Staines," said she. "I wondered at the time what had become of it, but I too had forgotten it by now."

So Staines helplessly saw one of his only two treasures (the franc piece was the other) return into the possession of her who gave them value.

Denise, for her part, however, did not altogether believe him, for she had seen something in his expression as the handkerchief made its appearance which afterwards gave her much matter for thought. While she was looking at the photographs, Staines walked across to the window. After a moment he turned round and said, "I think I hear the voices of two men approaching the hotel. I can't see them in the darkness, but they may be Mr Vane-Wenston and Colonel de Zouchy. If you will excuse me a minute, I will go and see, as I want to speak to the colonel."

He went out and strolled down the path to meet the two forms he could now see dimly outlined in the darkness. As they came nearer he heard that they were speaking German, yet one voice was the colonel's.

"Then," he asked himself, "where is Vane-Wenston?" He called out, "Colonel, is that you?"

"But yes, it is I. This gentleman here is Doctor Hartmann, whom I believe you have met before."

Hartmann and Staines having saluted one another, the latter said, turning to the colonel, "But where is Vane-Wenston?"

"Ah," interposed the doctor, "there has been a terrible accident. That is why I am so late. But our friend here will explain. Pardon me, but I must hurry to see the lady," and he walked rapidly on and entered the hotel, leaving Staines and the colonel together.

"What has happened?"

"Vane-Wenston is dead," was the laconic answer.

"Good God! how?"

"I will tell you. I had gone after him,

for I also had something important to say to him" (the colonel's voice shook slightly). "I hired a carriage at Esend, and we went as fast as we could drive to Brig. He was there before me. I found him *chez* Hartmann, so there was not time to speak much. Well, we all three began our journey back in the carriage, and before we came to Esend the valley was in profound darkness. That must have been at about seven o'clock. We were not very far from Esend when the diligence ran into us, owing to an error on the part of our driver. It was all over in a minute. Our horse was killed. Hartmann and I were thrown out into the road. We were not hurt, but Vane-Wenston fell on the other side, and his head was crushed under the hoofs of the horses of the diligence. He died at once. Oh, his head, it was a mass of blood. Our driver was badly hurt also, but he was not killed.

"Well, *enfin*, the diligence turned back, and Vane-Wenston and our driver have been carried to Esend, where they lie at the Hotel des Alpes for the present. No one else was injured. That is all. Hartmann and I

pushed on here as soon as we could, being anxious about Mrs Keston, who is very ill, as you know. What is the time now?"

"Nearly ten o'clock."

"Yes, we should have been here more than one hour ago."

"What will Miss Keston do? She loved him—"

"Ah, you knew that?"

"There is no harm in saying it now."

"My friend, what will she do? I know not how to tell her."

Silence fell on them. Presently they looked up towards the hotel and saw, in the light that shone from the entrance, Doctor Hartmann stepping out on to the verandah. They went on, and met him at the foot of the steps.

"Mrs Keston died ten minutes ago. I could do nothing. Failure of the heart's action. Her husband and her daughter were with her at the last. Now I must go back to Brig, for I have many things to do. Good-night."

So he passed on into the darkness.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE END OF IT ALL

It was Sunday the 23rd of September. Denise, dressed now in deep black, sat in the salon of the Hotel Helsenhorn, alone.

Looking from the window, she could see the same old scene, the village with the quaint little church, girdled by smiling meadowland, green and golden in the sunshine, lulled, as it were, to Sabbath rest by the ceaseless plashing of the Marl.

Ah, but how many times had that scene smiled on her, and spoken peace while her poor heart throbbed to the iron tune of fate. Surely destiny was cruel. Surely she was reaping more than she had sown.

It seemed that she was left utterly desolate, that only her father remained to her in the world.

After the burial of her mother and of



Geoffrey Vane-Wenston in the little churchyard at Esend, the colonel had departed from Marlenberg, leaving behind him a letter for Denise, in which he implored her forgiveness for the scene in the dark room, pleading that at the time he had not known what he was doing, and asking her to keep kindly memories of him for that she would never see him again. He had ended by wishing her all happiness in life, and assuring her of his honour in all that concerned her.

So Colmar de Zouchy passed out of her life for ever.

Amid the wreck of all her shattered illusions, through the blank desolation of sorrow, there shone one kindly sentiment. " 'Tis kindness that still begets kindness ;" and the gentle tact and sympathy of Mortimer Staines during this past dark week had quickened a deep friendship that she hoped would never be broken.

- An instinct, strengthened by the remembrance of the lace handkerchief, told her that she was loved by him, that his friendship went very deep. His calm strong nature seemed to surround and soothe her. It was

good, perhaps, to know that she was loved by such a one.

She knew that never again could she love passionately, as she had loved Geoffrey. All such days as those were done:—

*“Fires that shook me once, but now to silent ashes fall’n  
away.  
Cold upon the dead volcano sleeps the gleam of dying  
day.”*

Yet she knew that always she would have an affection for Staines that might in the end approach nearer to perfect happiness than all the fierce intemperate sweetness of passion. But the memory of Sea View was ever heavy upon her yet, and one man still lived who knew of that. Even his assurance “that his honour was perfect in all that concerned her” did not comfort her. She must bear for ever the dread burden of that secret. But she would lighten it with many a year of calm intellectual association.

Denise had not realised the measure of Staines’s love, nor had she anticipated what a sense of despair might lead him to do.

She made a lovely picture, as she reclined in an easy-chair, there in the salon of the

quiet hotel where so many a terrible scene had been enacted. The storm that had passed had not been potent to impair the grace of her form or the sweetness of her face. Only it had deepened the seriousness of her eyes, and hallowed her with the sacredness of suffering.

There was a sudden footstep outside. The door opened and Staines came in. She smiled at him.

“Well, old friend.”

“Miss Keston, I have come to say good-bye.”

The light died out of her eyes.

“Ah, but why?”

He did not answer. After a pause he continued, lamely enough,—

“You and your father are leaving to-morrow also, and I had long since made up my mind to go soon after the 20th. I think I shall go north into Germany.”

Silence. Then she said,—

“But I shall see you again.”

“Would to God I might hope that. Yet—” he ceased.

“Oh, what makes you say that? ’

His love for her was greater than he could bear in silence, and now he could hold back speech no more, and all the while, though he felt the cruelty of speaking at such a time, the words broke from him in disorder, and would not be stayed.

“I thought you might have guessed. Oh, Denise, it is because I love you so. Oh, forgive me for speaking at a time like this. It is not my fault. I could not help myself. Do you remember the handkerchief? You dropped it, you know, and I kept it as a memory of you. Ah, my sweet, my love, it was sacred because it had been yours. And now, how hopeless is this love of mine. Yet,—oh, Denise, may it be—can you after all?”

The blow had fallen. She had never dreamed of this. As he spoke she saw rise up between them the grim grey barrier of the memory of Sea View, cutting her off from this man whom otherwise she would have taken as her life-long guardian and friend. Passion was dead for ever, and there was none she trusted and admired more than Staines. Yet,—ah, the memory.

Then suddenly blind wrath rose in her,

wrath with this inexorable barrier, this spectre of past wrong that loomed over her years.

No, she would not let the past triumph over the future. She would crush this accursed memory even at the risk of losing all.

In that moment her soul was lifted up beyond the heights, and she spoke,—

“Old friend, you do not know what you ask, and what will you say when I tell you. I would let your noble friendship bind us for ever. I know that you love me, and I know that I could trust your love. Oh, but there is something between us that you cannot know, something that cuts us off from one another. Ah, why do I speak like this? Your words have wrung it from me.

“He who lies down there (she motioned towards Esend)—he, I say, loved me once, yes, I think he loved me passionately, and I, oh, I think you know something of how I loved him. Ah, we loved each other so, and—and we sinned. There now, you see it all—all. Oh, my friend, my friend, cannot you pity me? It was only—oh, but I can't go on. Oh, pity, pity me.”

Her voice died away. There was no sound in the room but one of quiet weeping.

Staines remained quite still. Then he said in a low voice,—

“Denise, will you have me now? Let the memory of old days die, and we will begin afresh. Do you think that my love for you could be blighted by what has been? Perhaps it is not an ordinary love— And now I ask again, will you have me?”

She rose and stretched out both hands to him. “Yes.” He bent and kissed her hands. Then he said,—

“We will go together from Marlenberg to-morrow. You, and your father, and I.”

THE END

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# THE SERF

A Historical Novel by C. RANGER-GULL

Author of "*The Hypocrite*," "*Back to Lilac Land*," etc.

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